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UNDERSTANDING HOW FIRST YEAR COLLEGE STUDENTS DEVELOP ACADEMIC  
PERFORMANCE EXPECTATIONS: A QUALITATIVE CASE STUDY

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
Louisiana State University and  
Agricultural and Mechanical College  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy

in

The School of Education

by

Christina Marie Coover  
B.A., Mercyhurst University, 2009  
M.Ed., University of North Texas, 2011  
May 2017

This work is dedicated to my maternal and paternal grandfathers, Buddy James Glover and Norman Lee Coover. I'd like to imagine I am a mix of each of my grandpas' character and personality. Buddy James Glover was a quiet-gentle man, deeply introspective, never turned down the chance to lend a helping hand and could almost always be found with his nose in a book. Norman Lee Coover greeted everyone with open arms; he loved deeply and could always make even the smallest of life's moments feel special.

One thing my grandpas both had in common were their infectious smiles, which I miss very much. Before each of my grandpas passed away they made me promise, I would get my doctorate. This dissertation and degree are dedicated to them, thank you for always believing in me. I know you both are in heaven smiling from ear to ear!

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I also want to thank my friends and family for being supportive of me while working on my degree. Working towards my PhD has consumed much of my life during these past three years, leaving little time for family and friends, thank you for being understanding. I'm done! And I'm looking forward to catching up on lost time.

This education accomplishment would not have been possible without my parents. Thank you for the many sacrifices you have made over the years to support my educational dreams. Thank you for being my strongest support system, for always believing in me, and encouraging me when I doubted myself. Thank you for valuing education and developing my desire to learn – I hope to leave a legacy you will be proud of!

Lastly, I want to thank my partner, Kyle Jones. Kyle, thank you for your unwavering support. I don't think either of us really knew what this PhD program was going to entail and what a journey it has been. So, thank you for pushing me when I wanted to walk away, especially during my first semester when I had major doubts about my ability to earn this degree. Thank you for taking on more than your share of the housework and meal prepping so that I could focus on my schoolwork. Thank you for giving me hope that there was an end insight and all the hard work would be worth it. Kyle thank you for the many big and small sacrifices you have made while I have worked on my PhD, this degree is for us, and our future.

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## **ABSTRACT**

The purpose of this research study was to explore how incoming first year students develop their academic performance expectations, differences between students in the development of academic performance expectations, and lastly the role of the university has in communicating expectations to students. The researcher utilized case study research to examine various perspectives related to the development of academic performance expectation. Research methodology included, participant interviews, document analysis and observation. Research findings are highlighted by ten first year college students' experiences; half of the participants were previously higher performing and the other half were previously lower performing. Performance was based on high school GPA and ACT or SAT scores.

Data analysis revealed students are considering four main factors when developing their academic performance expectations: differences between high school and college, prior academic experiences, course impressions, and required actions. There were two significant differences between the two groups in the development of academic performance expectations. First students with higher high school GPAs and ACT/SAT scores communicated they felt more prepared for college academics compared to students in the lower group. Additionally, students with higher high school GPAs and ACT/SAT scores were less likely to over predict their final course grades. Lastly, findings from the document analysis and research findings indicated the university communicated limited information about academic rigor expectations. Instead information communicated by the university about academic focused on process related tasks.

The findings from this research study present several implications for secondary and post-secondary education. Potential recommendations include increase communication between secondary and post-secondary regarding academic readiness, and implementation of intentional

programs to help incoming first year students better align their academic expectations.

Interventions to improve the alignment of expectations are necessary to increase student's academic success

## **CHAPTER ONE: MISALIGNED EXPECTATIONS**

It's late August in the Deep South and despite the exhausting heat on campus there is an excitement in the air. The Fall 2015 semester is about to get underway as the campus welcomes 5,300 new freshmen to campus. As a new semester begins I prepare to mentor incoming students who are transitioning into their first semester, by providing them assistance as they embark on an exciting and sometimes overwhelming journey. I would like to share one particular student's story, named Evan.

Like most students, during Evan's first meeting with me, he was mostly energetic, somewhat apprehensive, but overall optimistic about what the college experience has in store. I work to engage Evan's excitement about the college experience but also engage him in a more critical conversation about transitioning to college. Particularly, I ask Evan several questions regarding academics – "What were your study habits in high school, and how might those study habits change for college?", "How often do you plan on studying for your classes?", "Are there particular subjects you tend to struggle in?". Evan meets these questions with short, non-descriptive, and unconcerned responses, to which I briefly review several of the resources the campus has to offer. As our first mentoring meeting comes to an end, I encourage Evan to reach out if he has any questions and tell him I look forward to checking-in with him later in the semester.

Mid-October has arrived and Evan and I have scheduled a follow-up meeting. During this meeting I ask Evan how he is transitioning to campus, Evan responds "Overall things are good, but things could be better in my classes. I am failing three classes and have C's in my other two classes". I begin to process with Evan to find out what has happened; I ask several questions to understand the underlying issues. Through our conversation Evan shares, that he rarely spent

time on academics outside of class in high school, when he did study it was the night before the test and now in college he isn't really sure how to study for his classes. Evan states, "College isn't what I expected, I thought I could do what I did in high school and be fine." Evan's experience about misaligned expectations isn't unique to him; I've mentored numerous students who share a similar narrative to Evan's. It is these student experiences of misaligned academic expectations that have shaped the direction of this research.

### **Topic Introduction**

Colleges and universities have a responsibility to help incoming students develop both realistic and positive expectations. When students set high expectations and institutions of higher education support students in meeting those expectations, students benefit from enhanced educational performance (NSSE, 2015; Tinto, 2012). Specifically, college students whose expectations closely match their experiences are more likely to integrate into the campus academic and social communities and remain on campus (Braxton, Vesper & Hossler, 1995). Entering college, students bring with them expectations in three main areas: social, academic rigor, and institutional characteristics (Pleitz, Macdougall, Terry, Buckley & Campbell, 2015). Of these three areas, academic rigor had the greatest discrepancy between the students' expectations and their actual experiences.

The disconnection between academic expectations and experiences is not surprising considering the numerous studies that have explored factors influencing student retention and persistence (Astin, 1984; Bean & Eaton, 2001; Tinto, 1993). Some of the most commonly cited factors influencing retention include: academic preparedness, academic engagement, social engagement, financing college, and demographic characteristics (Demetriou & Schmitz-Sciborski, 2011). While a considerable amount of research has focused on academic

preparedness and academic commitment more generally, fewer studies have explored how college students develop academic expectations. Insight into how college students develop expectations will provide greater awareness to how universities can engage students to develop realistic and challenging expectations.

### **Statement of the Problem**

In recent years Higher Education's ability to recruit and retain students has become a growing public concern. According to the National Center for Education Statistics in 2012, 66.2% of students in the United States who graduated from high school enrolled in either a four-year or two-year institution (U.S. Department of Education, 2014, Table 302.10). Of those students who attend either a four-year or two-year institution, the retention rate of first-time, full-time undergraduates was 71.8% for all public institutions in 2012, a dismal 1.8% increase from the 2006 retention rate of 70% (U.S. Department of Education, Table 326.30). Further analyses of these statistics show little improvement in either of these areas during the past 10 years causing additional alarm for our education system.

To address these concerns, Tinto established that universities need four elements to achieve student success in order to improve student retention. The four elements for student success include: expectations, support, assessment & feedback, and involvement (Tinto, 2012). Specifically focusing on the first condition, expectations, Tinto argues, "student retention and graduation is shaped by the availability of clear and consistent expectations about what is required to be successful in college" (2012, p. 10). Research suggests high school academic experiences initially shapes college student expectations (Conley, 2007a; Conley, 2007b; Kuh, 2007). The high school academic experiences as well as other educationally purposeful activities shape student college readiness.

## **The Readiness Gap**

Students who struggle in the transition from high school to college may face a college readiness gap. The college readiness gap “reflects the disparity between the skills and knowledge that students gain high school versus the skills and knowledge that college and universities expect” (The National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, 2010, p.3). The college readiness gap reflects an incongruence between the academic preparations high school students receive and the academic expectations professors require college students to meet. Retention and persistence research suggest that a major reason students are not successful in their transitions to college is a result of the discrepancies between high school academic preparedness and academic rigor expected of college students (Conley, 2007a). Research conducted by the National Survey for Student Engagement (NSSE) highlights several examples of the discrepancy between high school experiences and the academic expectations at the college level.

The Beginning College Survey of Student Engagement (BCSSE) evaluates first-year college students’ academic and co-curricular involvements in high school and the importance students place on educationally purposeful activities during their first year of college. Results of this survey provide insight on the time first year students expected to spend preparing for classes. A little more than half (55%) reported spending three or fewer hours a week preparing for their high school classes (NSSE, 2005). When asked about the time students expected to spend studying for college level courses, 60% of first year students expected to spend more than 15 hours per week studying for class; of those 60%, only 40% self-reported actually studying more than 15 hours per week (NSSE, 2005). The discrepancy in time spent studying is problematic for several reasons.

First, previous study habits indicate future study habits. The NSSE 2015 Annual Survey discovered that over two-thirds of students who studied more than 15 hours a week in high school also studied 15 hours a week or more in their first year of college (NSSE, 2015). Entering the first year of college, students come to rely on the academic behaviors and study habits they develop during their high school tenure (NSSE, 2015). The same survey further reveals that students who studied more than 15 hours per week engaged in higher-order learning and were more likely to earn A's in their courses during the first year of college (2015). In addition to academic habits, prior academic achievement is also an important indicator of future academic success. Prior academic achievement such as high school GPA and standardized test scores account for approximately 25% of the variance in predicting college academic success (Robbins et al., 2004). Students who perform better academically are more likely to be retained and ultimately persist to graduation (Kirby & Sharpe, 2001); and thus the study habits students bring with them to college are vitally important.

What incoming first year college students believe is necessary and what the faculty and the institution believe are necessary for successful academic performance often diverge widely. Highlighting this point, data from NSSE shows that first year students spend, on average about half the time (15 hours per week) studying compared to the 30 hours per week that faculty believe is necessary to be successful (2006). This difference in time spent studying creates concern considering that research indicates students who study more hours per week will earn higher GPAs during their first year (Kuh, Cruce, Shoup, Kinzie & Gonyea, 2008). While college students come to college with distorted expectations about the academic demands, students also report a lack of academic challenge. The NSSE 2015 annual report found that a little over half (54%) of first year students were highly challenged to do their best academic work. Of the



students who were highly challenged, these students reported being more likely to participate in effective educational practices (2015). Effective educational practices required complex cognitive tasks using learning strategies such as: active reading, reviewing notes, and summarizing what was learned (NSSE, 2015).

More importantly, the survey found that students who faced challenges from their courses reported gains in personal learning, development, and overall satisfaction with the educational experience (NSSE, 2015). Previous research supports this finding asserting that when college students' expectations around academics and intellectual development are not met, these students will face lower levels of persistence (Braxton et al., 1995). Consequently, NSSE maintains that faculty and administrators are responsible for creating an environment that encourages high expectations and challenges students to do their best work (2015). Thus it becomes imperative for higher education faculty and administrators to engage students in the process of developing attainable expectations about desired academic achievement. To better comprehend what ways colleges and universities can better align incoming first year students expectations, an understanding of how college students develop expectations is necessary.

Furthermore, a large inconsistency surrounding academic rigor expectations exists between high school and first year college students. The NSSE (2005) annual report found about half of high school students spend three or less hours per week preparing for all their classes, of which two-thirds reported earning mostly A and B grades. This data indicates high school students are able to perform well academically for marginal amount of time spent. Thus it is not surprising high school students carry these academic expectations with them into their first year of college. An astounding 92% of first year college students expected to earn grades of B or better; however only 40% actually studied more than 15 hours per week (NSSE, 2005),

suggesting that first year college students believe they can perform well academically while investing minimal time and effort.

Differences specifically in expectations surrounding academic tasks exist; research suggests that high school students have not developed the academic skills and habits required at the college level. To this point, 70% of high school seniors reported writing three or fewer papers more than five pages in length compared to 33% of first year college students who were required to write five or more papers more than five pages in length (NSSE, 2005). College courses often move at a faster pace, requiring students to read, comprehend, and produce more work than required from high school course work. Many first year students find that college academic rigor is fundamentally different from their high school academic experiences. Professors expect college students to analyze multiple perspectives, critically think about problems and develop supported arguments (Conley, 2007a). A deeper understanding of how college students have come to learn and develop their academic college expectations can provide insight on how to address these differences in expectations.

### **Importance of Expectations**

While understanding the differences between high school academic preparations and the academic demands college students face is valuable, an understanding of how expectations influence college students' actions provides further insight on the importance of expectations. College students not only bring a variety of expectations with them to college, but in a study conducted by Jackson, Pancer, Pratt and Hunsberger discovered that students have distinct styles of expectations: optimistic, prepared, fearful, and complacent (2000). Jackson et al. claim, "expectations about university were found to be important predictors of students' adjustment during the transition to university" (2000, p.2119). In fact the style of expectations students held

played a significant role in the students' adjustment to college. Students with fearful expectations experienced poorer adjustment to college compared to students categorized with prepared expectations (Jackson et al. 2000). Students with prepared expectations were able to identify the difficulties they faced and create a plan to navigate these difficulties, indicating the ability to successfully adapt to challenges in their college transition.

In addition to the styles of expectations students bring, Pancer, Hunsberger, Pratt and Alisat determined that the complexity (detail of thoughts) of the expectations students held towards college also serves as predictors of adjustment (2000). The study revealed the relationship between stress and integrative complexity; students who demonstrated higher levels of complexity in their expectations adjusted better than students whose expectations were basic and more one-dimensional (Pancer et al., 2000). Moreover, students with integrative complexity also had lower levels of stress, suggesting that integrative complexity acts as a stress buffer. Complexity in expectations indicates a greater cognitive readiness for future demands, including the ability to anticipate and develop strategies to deal with challenges (Pancer et al., 2000). Instead of becoming paralyzed when facing challenges, students with integrative complexity are able to navigate through differences in expectations and experiences.

Beyond the various styles and depth of expectations, college students also bring with them a variety of expectations. As mentioned previously, college students bring expectations in three areas: social engagement, institutional characteristics, and academic rigor (Pleitz et al., 2015). Of the three areas, the largest discrepancy between expectations and experiences occurred within academic rigor, further supporting the reality of a college readiness gap. In addition to this discovery, Pleitz et al. (2015) also established that students who did not feel the university met their expectations were less likely to return to college compared to their peers who felt their

expectations aligned with their experiences. Braxton et al. further support this finding claiming, “the greater the extent to which expectations for academic and intellectual development are being fulfilled, the greater the degree of academic integration” (1995, p.604). Both of these studies support the notion that a significant relationship exists between the levels at which that student’s expectations are met and the level of persistence in college.

When college students expectations are not met, research suggest students’ expectations have been violated (Pancer et al., 2000) leaving students to reconcile the differences in expectations and experiences. Students without the proper skills and support to reconcile differences are likely to consider departing their institutions of study. The significance of college students’ desire to have expectations match experiences should signal college administrators to pay closer attention to the expectations students bring with them to college. College faculty and administrators should actively facilitate conversations with incoming first year students in order to help students align personal expectations with the expectations of the institution.

Research has indicated the greatest divergence in expectations and actuality lies within academics (Pleitz et al., 2015). Additional studies further highlight the academic expectations discrepancy by having student predict course grades. Svanum & Bigatti conducted a study exploring college students’ abilities to accurately predict their expected grades, discovering that 70% of students overestimate their first semester final course grades (2006). Students in the lowest GPA bracket (less than 2.1 GPA) were more prone to overestimate their expected academic success in a course (Svanum & Bigatti, 2006) indicating that a majority of students have idealistic expectations towards their expected academic performance. Even more concerning are the students with low prior academic achievement who are more likely to overestimate course grades than students who had moderate to high prior academic achievement.

Intervention is needed for a majority of students in developing academic expectations but expressly for students who have low prior academic performance.

Differences in high school academic achievement and college academic performance serve as an indicator of student retention. Researchers Shihadeh and Reed (2014) investigated student retention analytics for the Southern Flagship University (SFU). Shihadeh and Reed used data from approximately 40,000 students to develop an algorithm, a predictive data method, integrating 138 variables to determine which variables optimized prediction of retention (2014). Results of the research established that grade differential (the difference between high school GPA and first semester college GPA) had the largest significant effect on student retention (Shihadeh & Reed, 2014). In other words, students who perform at a consistent GPA level overtime, independent of high or low, GPA are more likely to be retained. For example, a student who earns a 3.5 GPA in high school and then earns a 2.0 GPA the first semester of college is less likely to be retained compared to a high school student who achieves a 3.0 GPA and then earns a 2.8 GPA the first semester of college. Shihadeh and Reed suggest students judge their current academic performance based on past performance (2014); consequently students are drawing on pervious academic experiences to establish future academic performance expectations. Shihadeh & Reed's research methodology has been reported in white papers and they are in the beginning stages of taking the statistical analysis to other institutions of higher education.

The existing literature on expectations towards academic performance indicates expectations have a profound affect on the way in which first year students adjust to the new demands of college. However, the problem remains that there is little understanding of how first year college students develop expectations and whether or not differences exist between students who have varying degrees of grade differentials. Through an enhanced understanding of how

college students develop academic expectations, secondary and postsecondary education systems can more proficiently assist students with developing aligned academic expectations.

### **Theoretical Framework**

While there are a number of theoretical approaches to explore the development of academic performance expectation for first year college students, two frameworks have emerged as most favorable: self- efficacy theory and psychological contract theory. Each theory provides insight into the importance of college student expectations; the self-efficacy theory contributes to an individualistic understanding of student expectations, whereas the psychological contract aims to understand expectations held between an individual and an organization. Both frameworks provide unique perspectives into the phenomena at hand.

Bandura (1997) describes self-efficacy as “the belief in one’s capabilities to organize and execute courses of action required to produce given attainment” (p. 3). More specifically, self-efficacy is the belief to carry out precise actions and behaviors necessary to “deal with prospective situations containing many ambiguous, unpredictable and often stressful elements”(Bandura & Schunk, 1981, p.587) In the context of higher education researchers have used self-efficacy to understand student adjustment and performance. Particularly, self-efficacy has been linked to academic performance and persistence (Wood & Locke, 1987; Zajacova, Lynch and Espenshade, 2012). First year students arriving to college with high levels of self-efficacy perform stronger academically and adjust better to college. Similarly self-efficacy significantly and directly relates to academic expectations and academic performance (Chemers, Hu & Garcia, 2001). Students who entered college with higher expectations for academic success performed at higher levels. Self-efficacy theory could be useful in exploring why first year college students from various academic high school backgrounds develop different

expectations about their academic performance. While acknowledging that high school GPA relates to academic self-efficacy (Zajacova, et al., 2012), other factors outside of high school GPA likely influence self-efficacy and college academic expectations.

Bandura also makes an important distinction between efficacy expectations and outcome expectancy. Outcome expectancy is an individual's estimate that a particular action will lead to certain outcomes; conversely, an efficacy expectation is an individual's belief that they can successfully perform the action required to produce the outcome (Bandura, 1977). The distinction underscores that individuals may believe that a particular action will result in a desired outcome, but if that individual has doubts about his or her ability to perform the necessary action, these doubts will influence the commitment to the action. For example, a first year college student may believe that attending class will result in better academic performance, but if the first year student has an eight o'clock am class and is not a 'morning person,' this student may not be committed to attend classes at that time. This distinction is an important one to keep in mind when analyzing and understanding expectations.

The psychological contract theory aims to understand expectations from a relational perspective. Rousseau (1989) describes psychological contract theory as, "an individual's belief regarding the terms and conditions of a reciprocal exchange agreement between that focal person and another party" (p.123). Researchers have primarily used the psychological contract theory in business settings to understand a new employee's expectations of his or her work environment. Psychological contracts are built on schemas. A schema is the cognitive organization of conceptual elements informed by past experiences that gradually develops over time and guides the new way a person organizes information (Rousseau, 2001; Stein, 1992). Prior socializations – e.g., societal and occupational norms, and past work experiences – shapes pre-employment

schemas and provides a lens through which workers interpret future employment experiences (Rousseau, 2001). Schemas “affect the creation of meaning around promises and commitments workers and employers make to each other, and the interpretations of the scope of their obligations and the degree of mutuality and reciprocity the parties manifest” (Dobos & Rousseau, 2004, p. 53). Mutuality and reciprocity are essential to understanding the nature of the psychological contract.

Mutuality refers to the degree to which both parties agree on their understanding of the promises and commitments. Reciprocity refers to the reciprocal exchange and the degree to which each party is responsible for an appropriate return (Dobos & Rousseau, 2004). An environment where mutuality exists has substantial benefits for both workers and the organization; mutuality creates a shared understanding, allowing both parties to align behaviors with expectations (Dobos & Rousseau, 2004). When employees and employers’ understanding of their obligations to each other do not align, the psychological contract has been violated or breached. Trust underlies the psychological contract (Rousseau, 1989), and, when violated causes stress on the employee-organization relationships, leading to emotional exhaustion and increases in turnover rates (Lapointe, Vandenberghe & Boudrias, 2013). Thus establishing psychological contracts that are mutual and reciprocal is fundamental to the health of the organization and employees.

Much like new employees bring existing schemas to work, first year college students also bring with them schemas based on their previous academic experience. Additionally, when college students’ expectations do not align with their experiences, these students will experience increased levels of stress and decreased rates of retention (Braxton et al., 1995; Pancer et al., 2000; Pleitz et al., 2015). While the psychological contract theory has primarily been applied in



business contexts, the theory has been used in a limited number of higher education studies (Miller, Bender & Schuh, 2005; Pleitz et al. 2015). A review of the psychological contract theory suggests elements of the theory may provide meaningful insight into the dynamics of college students' expectations.

### **Significance of the Problem**

In 2012, 43% of the population had attained a higher education degree in the United States. This earned it a fifth place ranking of countries with the highest degree just after Canada, Israel, Japan and Russian Federation (OECD, 2014). However, the rate of tertiary attainment is increasing much faster in 11 other countries above the United States, which has an attainment rate of 44% for 25-34 year-olds (OECD, 2014). The completion rate of students from higher education institutions is a problem and requires attention if graduation rates are to increase.

The completion of a college degree is important for several reasons. Not surprisingly, Americans who have earned a bachelor's degree make more money over their lifetimes than workers who do not. The United States Census Bureau reports that workers with a GED earn about \$23,000, workers with a high school diploma earn about \$27,000, and workers with bachelor's degrees earn about \$48,000 annually (2012). In other words, the median earnings for Americans aged 25 and over with a bachelor's degree were 77% higher than a worker with a high school education. In addition to earning more money over a lifetime, research indicates citizens with higher education typically encounter better chances of employment, remaining employed, and gain opportunities to develop knowledge (OECD, 2015). Increasing educational attainment not only results in a healthier economy; it also strengthens our communities by improving health, decreasing crime and producing more active citizens (Lumina Foundation, 2013). The many positive benefits of earning a bachelor's degree emphasize the importance of

not only providing greater access to higher education, but more importantly supporting students in overcoming the barriers preventing degree completion.

Achieve, a nonprofit education reform organization dedicated to raising academic standards, is leading efforts to make college and career readiness a priority. Although there may be many reasons a high school student graduates unprepared for college or employment, Achieve argues, “states’ failure to set end of high school expectations aligned with the expectations of the real world created an ‘expectations gap’ that trip up high school graduates” (Achieve, 2014, p.3). The aforementioned research findings highlight a stark difference between expectations held by incoming first year students and what these students ultimately come to experience. This begs the question: Are high school seniors adequately prepared to attend college and remain successful? The short answer - there is still much room for improvement.

Researchers and education policy reformers have pointed to an idle high school senior year as an area for improvement (The American Diploma Project, 2014; Kuh, 2007; Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship Foundation, 2001). High school student engagement decreases in a linear manner from freshman year of high school to senior year, indicating that high school students are least engaged during their senior year (Kuh, 2007). The decrease in student engagement suggests the high school administrators could advantageously use the high school senior year as a time to prepare college-bound students. In 2001, the National Commission on the High School Senior Year prepared a report providing several recommendations to improve the high school senior year. The Commission called for more rigorous activities during the senior year including: capstone projects, career preparation opportunities such as internships, and an increase in college level courses (Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship Foundation, 2001).

Although educators and policy makers make efforts to improve the transition from high school to college, the educational pipeline still suffers from deficiencies. A startling 53% of college students take at least one remedial English or math course during their college career (The American Diploma Project, 2014). Meaning more than half of students attending college are not prepared to meet the academic standards expected at the college level. To address these deficiencies in academic expectations, educational policy makers attempted to address the college readiness gap and several other educational issues through policy reform such as Common Core. In 2009, state leaders from 48 states gathered together to develop common college and career-ready standards for two subjects: mathematics and English. The development of common core standards focused on defining academic expectations every child should meet before graduating high school (Common Core States Standards Initiative, 2016). In 2010, the committee published the final standards and made available for states to implement on a voluntary basis. Common Core has led to states implementing minimum educational achievement standards and emphasizing standardized testing.

Despite changes to advance high school academic standards, education reformists contend the changes do not fully reflect the future academic and employment demands students will face. One criticism of the current standards is the limited focus on mathematics and English subjects. While these two subject areas serve as the foundation for many other academic disciplines, states need to develop standards across other major academic disciplines such as science and social studies (Achieve, 2014). In addition to expanding academic content standards, ACT strongly recommends states cultivate academic success habits for students (2014). Progressing academic standards is critical to increasing student success after high school departure; however, students also need to cultivate behavioral habits such as motivation, social

engagement, and self-regulation concurrently (ACT, 2014). Academic preparation alone is not enough; students also need exposure to academic behaviors and skills required to be successful in college. High school seniors should gain skills reflecting the pace, higher-order thinking, and academic rigor of entry-level college courses.

Another common criticism is the shortage of collaboration and communication between the secondary and postsecondary education sectors (The American Diploma Project, 2014). The divide between K-12 and postsecondary education system has resulted in educators, administrators, and government officials calling for an educational renovation to bridge the gap (Achieve, 2014; The American Diploma Project, 2014; The National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, 2010). Currently, educational reform policies are largely addressed in separate spheres for example states may find it politically difficult to set higher academic standards due to the pressure to maximize the number of high school graduates (Achieve, 2014) instead of setting standards to produce college and career-ready students. An enhanced understanding of how incoming freshmen develop their academic expectations could lead to valuable policy change, providing insight into the areas of expectation development that need more attention.

Postsecondary institutions are equally responsible for assisting incoming first year students in developing realistic expectations about the realities of the academic college life. Colleges and universities must communicate clear and consistent information about what students can expect during their college journey in order to promote retention (Tinto, 2012). The responsibility of communicating realistic expectations starts with the recruitment and admissions process, continues with university programs such as summer orientation and first year experience seminar courses, and ultimately relies on faculty-student dialogue about expectations (Bowman & Denson, 2014; Crisp et al., 2009; Kuh, Laird & Umbach, 2004). Various campus members are

responsible for the ongoing communication and clarification of the expectations students will face.

### **Significance for the State**

The significance of the problem grows immensely at the state level for the institution of higher education that serves as the research site. To ensure participant anonymity, both the institution and the state have been given pseudonyms. The institution will be referred to as Southern Flagship University (SFU) and the State in which SFU is located will be referred to as Southern State. Improving college student retention for Southern State and Southern Flagship University is imperative for multiple reasons. First, in regards to the financial impact, Southern State's higher education currently faces one of the largest disinvestments of higher education by the state government (Southern Flagship University, n.d.). Southern Flagship University, like many other public-state institutions of higher education, must increasingly depend on tuition as a source of funding, especially as state governments are disinvesting. In 2014 -2015, the cost for tuition and fees was \$8,750 for in-state students and \$26,467 for out of state students. The cost for the university to retain one in-state student for four years is \$35,000 dollars; the cost to retain one out-of-state student is \$105,868. Tuition alone accounts for a large portion of money upon which the university depends on to generate a budget; not surprisingly, SFU has focused on increasing the number of out of state students attending due to the increased amount of revenue these students generate.

Adding to the complexity is Southern State's state-funded merit-based college tuition assistance program. The requirements and format of the college tuition assistance program have changed over the years since its original implementation in 1989. In order for Southern State's high school students to be eligible for the college tuition assistance program, they must have a

minimum high school GPA of 2.50, complete 19 of the core units, and earn a 20 or higher on the ACT. For this student to keep the scholarship during the duration of his or her college tenure, the student must keep a 2.5 GPA, be enrolled as a full time student, and earn at least 24 credits in an academic year (Russell, 2016). This scholarship covers eligible students' tuition and certain fees. Many Southern State students and their families have come to depend on the college tuition assistance program to attend college.

Nevertheless, due to Southern States' \$750 million dollar shortfall, higher education will face a \$131 million dollar reduction, with SFU flagship facing \$17 million dollars (SFU President, personal communication, February 26, 2016). In order to address the Southern State's budget crisis, state legislatures have considered changes to the college tuition assistance program, such as higher academic requirements or changes in the amount of financial support. Changes to the structure of the college tuition assistance program could have steep ramifications for SFU enrollment and retention, since more than half of the SFU's student body received scholarships from the college tuition assistance program in the fall of 2014 (Russell, 2016). Depending on the nature of the changes, SFU will need to develop a plan to not only retain students to SFU, but also to attract and enroll students who may not have the financial means of attending college.

In addition to the financial challenges facing students and higher education programs, Southern State students attending college are often not prepared to face the rigor and demands of college. As of 2014, Southern State is one of 11 states that offers college preparatory curriculum, which meets the college admissions standards; even so, students must individually choose to opt into these courses (Achieve, 2014). Allowing students to opt into college preparatory curriculum is problematic for two reasons. First, fewer students will be likely to opt into college preparatory

curriculum track, particularly students who are minorities or low-income (Achieve, 2014).

Second, if the state does not require all students to take college preparatory curriculum, not every school may offer college and career-ready courses for students (Achieve, 2014). This may result in a lower number of students who attend college and are prepared for the academic demands.

In 2009, the Southern State legislature passed the Southern State College and Career Readiness Act (Act 257), which requires the Board of Secondary Education and Elementary Education in collaboration with postsecondary school boards to establish initiatives to improve high school graduation rates and student readiness for college and career opportunities (Education's Next Horizon, 2011). However, as of 2013, only 34.6% of Southern State students aged 18-24 were enrolled in either a 2-year or 4-year postsecondary institution compared to a national average of 41.6% (Lumina Foundation, 2015). Of the students who graduated from high school in Southern State, a little over half entered into postsecondary education; of those, one in three went on to earn a college degree. Despite efforts made by the state legislature to improve educational attainment through college readiness plans, the data indicates gaps still exist between the skills and knowledge gained in secondary education and the academic, social, and environmental expectations students face in college.

Researchers have conducted a substantial amount of studies on the expectations first year students bring with to college and the importance those expectations have on adjustment and the college transition. Even so, limited research explores how college students develop their academic expectations, what factors students consider in developing expectations, and whether or not differences occur based on prior academic performance. With a better understanding of how students develop expectations faculty, staff, and administrators can more effectively engage students in the process of developing attainable academic achievement goals. The process of

assisting students to develop personal expectations in concurrence with the demands and expectations of the college will ultimately help students persist further in the quest for a college degree.



## **CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW**

The literature review will explore the salient research related to the importance of college students' academic achievements and the development of academic performance expectations. The literature review will begin with a summary of the general factors facing student retention and persistence with specific attention on the academic factors. This chapter will review literature of college students' expectations of college life, focusing specifically on academic expectations. Additionally, the review will include the barriers facing college students in the development of aligned expectations. Lastly, this chapter will provide a brief exploration of the relevant literature as it relates to self-efficacy theory and psychological contract theory. The literature review will conclude by identifying limitations and areas for research expansion.

### **Influences of Retention & Persistence**

#### **Non-Academic Predictors in Student Success**

Many researchers have dedicated time and energy to examine predictors of student success in college. Predictors determine how successful students will perform while in college. Some of the most studied student success predictors include: demographics (age, race, socio-economic status), previous academic achievement (high school GPA, standardized test score), non-cognitive skills (attitudes and behaviors), and student engagement (involvement in and out of the classroom; (Astin, 1999; Kuh, Kinzie, Buckley, Bridges & Hayek, 2006; Tinto, 1993). While there are many student success predictors, a review of the literature indicates prior academic performance such as high school GPA and standardized test performance are the principal predictors of student success (Pleitz et al., 2015; Robbins et al., 2004). However, other student factors such as student engagement, demographics, non-cognitive, and psychological are also helpful in predicting student success.

**Student engagement** .The degree to which college students choose to get involved within their college campus has a profound effect on persistence and retention (Astin, 1999). Astin's theory of student involvement refers to the quality and quantity of involvement students exhibit during the college experiences. According to the student involvement theory, the greater extent to which students are involved on campus, the greater likelihood that an increase in student learning and personal development takes place (Astin, 1999). Supporting Astin's theory of involvement Kuh, Cruce, Shoup, Kinzie & Gonyea found that student engagement in educationally purposeful activities during the first year of college resulted in a significant effect on student persistence (2008). Student engagement also heavily relies on the relationships students establish with peers, faculty, and staff members. Interactions with faculty members both inside and outside of the classroom have shown to be important predictors of persistence (Tinto 1993).

Other research has shown that students' relationships with their peers had the greatest effect on how well the student felt he or she fit at the institution, which ultimately influences persistence (Bean, 1985). College students' socialization and level of engagement with both peers and faculty are important factors in persistence and remain a large focus of study. While overall student engagement has a profound impact on student persistence, student engagement has a compensatory effect on first year grades and persistence for students who are identified as being at risk, such as students of color, low socioeconomic backgrounds, and first generation students (Kuh et al. 2006; Stage, 1989). It is vitally important for college administrators to be aware of student demographics and the various ways in which student demographic influence student persistence.

**Demographic.** Students demographic characteristics such as race, first-generation, and socioeconomic status also guide the degree to which students will be retained and persist to graduation. Research has found student graduation rates differ by race. For example in 2010 for all Bachelor degrees conferred to U.S. residents, White students accounted for 72.9%, Black students 10.3%, Hispanic students 8.8%, Asian/Pacific Islander students 7.7%, and American Indian/Alaska Native students 0.8% (U.S. Department of Education Table A-47-2, 2012). The disparity in graduation rates by race is reflective of the rates these races are admitted into college (NCES, 2012). The inequalities these students encounter – such as the lack of campus leaders with whom student identify with and the absence of inclusive space available – further explains this discrepancy in persistence rate for minority students (Harper, 2008). Additionally, socioeconomic status also affects persistence; students with higher socioeconomic status have higher first year GPAs and are more likely to stay in college than to drop out (Allen, Robbins, Casillas & Oh, 2008). Students who are first in their families to attend college are twice as likely to leave a four-year college compared to students with college education parents (California Community College Practitioners, 2009). The given examples highlight a few of the ways in which student demographic characteristics influence student retention and persistence.

**Noncognitive.** Noncognitive factors are a set of behaviors, skills, attitudes, and strategies that are critical to a student's academic performance and persistence in higher education (Nagaoka et al., 2013). A critical literature review of noncognitive factors reveals five general categories of noncognitive factors related to academic performance: academic behaviors, academic perseverance, academic mindsets, learning strategies, and social skills (Farrington et al., 2014). Non-cognitive factors help us to better understand how students become effective learners. Farrington et al. argues, “by helping students develop the

noncognitive skills, strategies, attitudes, and behaviors that are the hallmarks of effective learners, teachers can improve student learning and course performance while also increasing the likelihood that students will be successful in college”(2012, p.72).

**Psychosocial.** Psychosocial factors “examine the content of development – that is, the important issues people face as their lives progress, such as how to define themselves, their relationships with others and what to do with their lives” (Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton and Renn, 2010, p.42). Researcher can use psychosocial factors to better predict student academic success and overall persistence; for this reason, many researchers have begun including psychosocial factors in study designs. DeBerard, Spielmans and Julka (2004) studied potential psychosocial predictors (social support and coping techniques) along with other traditional predictors (high school GPA and SAT scores) for freshmen academic achievement and retention rates. The findings from the study assert that the psychosocial predictor significantly correlated with cumulative college GPA and accounting for 56% of the variance in first-year cumulative GPA (DeBerard et al., 2004). The use of psychosocial predictors in addition to prior academic performance results in accounting for a greater percentage of the variance in predicting student success.

Additionally, Beck and Davidson (2001) conducted a study using both traditional predictors (high school GPA, ACT/SAT test scores) and six others factors: structure dependence, creative expression, reading for pleasure, academic efficacy, academic apathy, and mistrust of instructors. Academic efficacy and academic apathy were the best predictors of GPA (Beck & Davidson, 2001). Considering two points of information it is not surprising that the two factors related to academic behavior and attitudes were the best predictors of academic success. Prior academic performance is a significant predictor of future academic performance (Robbins,

Lauver, Le, Davis, Langley & Carlstrom, 2004) and academic behaviors - such as study habits - transfer to college (NSSE, 2015). The findings from these studies suggest future studies should use both non-academic predictors and prior academic achievement (high school GPA and ACT/SAT scores). The use of both factors accounts for a greater amount of variance in first-year student academic achievement compared to the use of academic achievement alone.

The inclusion of multiple predictor factors (academic and non-academic factors) results in a more insightful understanding of the challenges and barriers facing students in the pursuit of a college degree. By more accurately predicting student success, colleges and universities can more efficiently and effectively identify students who need support and institutional resources to assist them with a successful transition. Predicting student success is imperative to allow college administrators and faculty to be proactive with support rather than reactive. While research has revealed both non-academic predictors and prior academic achievement are significant predictors of student success, it is evident that prior academic performance serves as a foundational predictor of student success and requires further investigation.

### **Academic Predictors in Student Success**

The aim of the study is to examine how first year students develop their academic expectations; therefore, it requires a more extensive review of academic factors impacting student success. Historically and most frequently researchers have cited previous academic achievement as a key predictor of future academic success and retention (Allen et al., 2008; Kuh, Cruce, Shoup, Kinzie & Gonyea, 2008). Research team Kuh et al. (2008) used data from the National Survey of Student Engagement and found that student demographic characteristics, pre-college experiences, and prior academic achievement accounted for 29% of the variance in first-year grades. Boldt (1986) supported this finding discovering that prior academic achievement

and standardized tests account for a quarter or more of the variance in first-year academic performance. These findings suggest a student's pre-college academic behaviors correlates with collegiate academic performance.

Research has linked student persistence from year to year and ultimately graduation to successfully academic performance. Allen et al. (2008) used data from the Student Readiness Inventory, which included 48 institutions and over 8000 students. They discovered that academic performance has large effects on a student's likelihood of retention and transferring. First Allen et al. identified a relationship between ACT score and high school GPA with first-year college GPA (2008). Once establishing this relationship, the research team also found that first-year college GPA strongly correlated with staying versus leaving. The research indicated students with poor academic performance during their first-year were more likely to leave college (Allen et al., 2008). By knowing the relationship between college academic performance and persistence, colleges and universities can better engage incoming students in conversations and activities, assisting students with the academic transition.

While researchers have tied a myriad of factors to student success, prior academic performance has remained the most predominate predictor of future success in terms of the percent of variance for which it exclusively accounts. However, academic performance does not explain everything, thus research has moved beyond solely using prior academic performance to examining other factors. Academic achievement prior to college along with other non-traditional predictors such as: student engagement, demographics, non-cognitive, and psychosocial, provides abundant insight into the elements impacting student success and persistence. Nonetheless, these are not the only factors; one must also consider students' expectations of their college experience.

## College Student Expectations

### General Expectations

First-time college students have a unique set of expectations about what their college experience will be like before they even step foot on a college campus. A variety of sources influences these expectations: conversations with family and friends who have attended college, teachers and mentors preparing students for their transition to college, television shows and movies with a college setting, and the college's advertisement and marketing strategies (Jackson, Pancer, Pratt & Hunsberger, 2000; Pancer, Hunsberger, Pratt & Alisat, 2000). Depending on the sources of influence, students entering college for the first time may develop realistic or unrealistic expectations. First, I will review the expectations college students' hold generally around college life; then I will review academic specific expectations.

To better understand college student expectations, Pace and Kuh developed the College Student Expectations Questionnaire (CSXQ) to measure student expectations for college including their attitudes and beliefs towards various campus activities. Analysis of the CSXQ presented the following results: students who attend private college have slightly higher expectations, women expect to participate more in educational-focused activities, and students of color expect to engage in campus activities more frequently than their white peers (Kuh, Gonyea & Williams, 2005). Not only do students arrive to college with a range of expectations, but students also have unique styles and complexity of expectations.

Jackson et al. (2000) studied the relationship between college students' expectations and level of adjustment to college life. Through a longitudinal study, the research team identified four distinct types of expectations that students had about college: *optimistic*, *prepared*, *fearful*, and *complement* (Jackson et al., 2000). Approximately one third of the students had *optimistic*

expectations and reporting having highly positive expectations about college particularly towards social life. The researchers categorized nearly one quarter of the students as having a *prepared* expectations style. Both the *optimistic* and *prepared* style of expectations shared positive outlooks; however, the *prepared* style of expectations was distinctive in the students' ability to anticipate difficulties and identify strategies for handling challenges. Jackson et al. classified less than one third of the students with *fearful* expectations, this style expressed poorer adjustment to university life with higher levels of stress and concerns about academics (2000). Lastly, students with *complacent* style expressed slightly more positive expectations but lacked any specific details about what those expectations would be (Jackson et al., 2000). Overall, the study confirmed that academics, social life, and personal adaptation are connected to students' expectations about college experiences.

In examining why students with the *prepared* style of expectations had superior adjustments to college, Jackson et al. offers the following insight, "the most straightforward interpretation of this finding is that people who are generally well adjusted, or perhaps have a strong sense of efficacy, expect good experiences during a transition because they have a history of good experiences" (2000, p.2119). The latter part of this interpretation aligns with predominate research which maintains that past academic performance and experiences are a strong indication for future academic performance (NSSE, 2015). Knowledge of incoming first year students' expectation style could drastically shape how intuitions provide support and resources to students. By providing students whose expectations are *fearful* or *complacent* style with additional resources, colleges can assist those students with the development of realistic expectations and coping strategies. Students with complacent styles expressed expectations that lacked details.



In addition to the various styles of expectations students hold, students also develop expectations in distinct complexities. Complexity of expectations addresses the degree of detail and perceptiveness students have in expectations towards the college experience. Pancer et al. investigate the nature of interaction between perceived stress, perceived amount of information students had about the college, and complexity of expectations related to adjustment for first year college students (2000). Through hierarchical regression analysis, the study produced several significant findings. First, students who reported high levels of stress showed relatively poor adjustment when the expectations were simple; however, students who also reported high levels of stress but communicated more complex expectations adjusted better (Pancer et al., 2000). Kreig (2013) also reported similar results, finding when academic and social experiences were better than expected, students reported lower levels of stress. These research findings together emphasize the importance for students to developing expectations that align with the experiences in order to reduce levels of stress and increase overall adjustment to college life.

The second major finding of the study indicated that the more information students perceived to have about the college, the more complex their expectations were about the realities of the college experience. Complexity of expectations significantly correlated with the amount of communication students reported having with others about college life (Pancer et al., 2000). Conversations about the realities of college effectively assist first year college students to develop detailed expectations that represent the college experience. This, of course, depends on the access first year college students have to parents, family, and friends who have attended college. While it is important to recognize the complexity and various types of expectations, understanding the implications of student expectations and considering the repercussions of unmet expectations is essential.

Braxton, Vesper and Hossler explore these implications, and discover two key findings: the more committed students are to reaching graduation “the greater the degree of importance they attach to the fulfillment of their expectations for college” (1995, p.604) and “the greater the extent to which expectations for academic and intellectual development are being fulfilled, the greater the degree of academic integration” (1995, p.604). Overall, the study found a significant relationship between the level with which students’ expectations were met and persistence in college. These findings are consistent with Smith and Wertlieb (2005) who studied pre-business majors finding that students with unrealistically high academic and social expectations had lower first-year GPAs than students who had average or below-average expectations. Other research has shown that when students do not meet their expectation, student level of satisfaction decreases and negatively influences likelihood to return (Suhre, Jasen & Harskamp, 2007).

These findings are not surprising considering the existing knowledge about the impact of met and unmet expectations on the brain. When expectations are met, a person will experience an increase in dopamine, the neurotransmitter of desire. When something unexpected happens, like receiving five bonus points on an exam, the brain releases even more dopamine. An increase in dopamine levels has a positive impact on the brain chemistry allowing the brain to be more focus and entertain more ideas (Rock, 2009). Conversely, when expectations are not met the dopamine levels fall more steeply causing a negative feeling similar to that of pain. A decrease in dopamine triggers a threat response, reducing the overall activity of the brain and the ability to process information (Rock, 2009). The link between expectations and dopamine may explain why people who are in a state of happiness have better mental performance (Rock, 2009). Thus managing expectations becomes essential for generating a sense of happiness and overall wellbeing. College student satisfaction increases as students’ expectations are met, suggesting

that college faculty and staff need to assist in the development of reasonable expectations to promote student success. While colleges and universities cannot entirely control students' expectations, institutions of higher education can provide clear and consistent communication about the academic, social, and environmental demands students will face, particularly the academic demands.

### **Academic Expectations**

College students specifically need assistance developing realistic academic expectations. In a study conducted by Pleitz, Macdougall, Terry, Buckley and Campbell, the research team found college students brought expectations in three main areas: social life, institutional characteristics, and academic rigor (2015). Of these three areas, the greatest discrepancy between what college students expected and what they experienced lay within academics. This discrepancy may be a result of false information or naïve expectations developed during high school.

Further highlighting this academic discrepancy, Svanum and Bigatti (2006) conducted a study exploring college students' ability to accurately predict their expected grades. The study found that 70% of the students overestimated their final grades. Moreover, the study examined the interaction between GPA success, grade expectations and prediction accuracy; Svanum and Bigatti sorted students in thirds (2006). Students in the bottom third (GPA less than 2.1) were more likely to overestimate their academic success in a course than their more successful classmates (Svanum & Bigatti, 2006). This suggests that students with lower previous academic performance are more optimistic when predicting future academic performance. Svanum and Bigatti do not recommend discouraging grade optimism, but instead faculty and staff should maintain optimism while encouraging students to develop the study skills necessary to perform

better academically (2006). Faculty and staff should test this recommendation to determine what form of intervention is most effective.

Supporting these findings, Prohaska (1994) investigated how accurately students estimate their final course grades and how confident students feel about their estimations. The study revealed that students with low and medium GPAs overestimated their course grades, the largest overestimation made by the low-GPA student. Additionally, the study revealed low-GPA students were significantly less confident in their predictions compared to students with high-GPAs; the lack of confidence suggest that low-GPA students have some awareness their predicted course grades were overly optimistic (Prohaska, 1994). While a majority of students will have some degree of overestimation of course grades, students who have low prior academic performance particularly need interventions. This student population is most likely to overestimate future academic performance. Without intervention students are likely to have unrealistic expectations about academic rigor, which may lead to lower levels of persistence (Braxton et al., 1995).

### **Barriers Impeding Aligned Expectation Development**

The alignment of college students' expectations and experiences leads to an increase in a student's desire to establish memberships in the academic and social communities on campus and continue enrollment. Of the expectations students bring with them – academic, social and institutional – students tend to have the largest incongruity with academics (Pleitz et al., 2015). A review of the literature suggests three main areas serve as barriers, which prevent the development of aligned and realistic expectations of college demands. Those three main areas consist of the college readiness gap, education policy, and higher education procedures.

## **College Readiness Gap**

College readiness is “a set of skills, behaviors, attitudes and knowledge, both cognitive and noncognitive possessed by individual student that shape their likelihood of attaining a college degree” (Nagaoka et al., 2013). College readiness is important because pre-college academic preparation is vital to academic performance in the first year of college, which ultimately affects the probability of staying, transferring, or dropping out (Allen, Robbins, Casillas & Oh, 2008). A college-ready student can comprehend what will be expected of them both inside and outside of the college classroom (Conley, 2007b) as well as possess the skills and knowledge to achieve success. The differences in expectations between high school and college have a substantial effect on how first year students adjust to college. First year college students will rely on the learning strategies and coping skills gained in high school which, in most cases will, be distinctly different than the strategies and skills needed for successful transition in college (Conley, 2007b; NSSE, 2015). An examination of college readiness literature quickly reveals a substantial gap between high school curriculum and the academic demands of college.

Several of the NSSE Annual Reports highlight differences in expectations such as the amount of time first year students expect to study to perform well academically. Another difference is the dependence on high school study habits, which often do not equip first year students for success (NSSE, 2005; NSSE, 2015). In addition to the discrepancies in expectations, a large portion first year college students do not meet the basic academic requirements; approximately half of college students needed at least one remedial course (The American Diploma Project, 2014). Inconsistencies in expectations are partially a result of an idle senior year (Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship Foundation, 2001). However, the misalignment suggests that students need a more substantial intervention beyond correcting the idle senior year

of high school. Many researchers and educational reformists alike have insisted postsecondary and secondary education systems work together to provide students not only with the academic foundation to be successful, but also a comprehensive understanding of the realities of college demands (Achieve, 2014; The American Diploma Project, 2014; Conley, 2007b; Smith & Wertlieb, 2005). Secondary and postsecondary education systems typically operate independently of each other, which has become increasingly problematic and caused many education stakeholders to take notice and advocate for policy change.

### **Education Policy**

The separation of secondary and postsecondary educational policy has certainly contributed to the college readiness gap and subsequently the misalignment of educational expectations between the two systems. Historically, the separation between secondary and postsecondary institutions may have been justifiable when a smaller number of high school students planned to attend college (Institute for Educational Leadership, 2006). However, in modern times, this is no longer the case. In 2006, 90% of high school students aspired to attend college (Institute for Educational Leadership, 2006); nevertheless, only 58% of high graduates actually attended college later that year (US Census Bureau, 2006). As the number of high school students who plan to attend college increases, it is imperative that secondary and postsecondary educational systems collaborate to assist students in a seamless and effective transition. The disengagement between secondary and postsecondary systems in regards to state testing and standardized testing has also proven to be challenging. State testing and national standardized testing, such as ACT and SAT send a mixed message as to which is more important (Achieve, 2014). These two forms of assessment serve different purposes. National standardized testing (ACT/SAT) is predominately oriented towards postsecondary readiness and used to make

decisions about college admissions; state education testing on the other hand serves as an evaluative assessment to make decisions regarding K-12 curriculum. The former, national standardized testing tends to hold higher value to students due to the emphasis placed on these scores in the college admissions and placement process (Achieve, 2014). In order to align the curriculum and academic standards between secondary and postsecondary systems, The American Diploma Project urges postsecondary institutions to use state-based high school assessment for college admission in the awarding of merit scholarships (2014).

Research indicates many of the misalignment issues between secondary and postsecondary could be addressed through increased communication and collaboration. Unfortunately, “most collaborations between schools and colleges can be described as voluntary, localized efforts that are dependent upon ad hoc leadership commitments” (Institute for Educational Leadership, 2006). To increase collaboration communities, education administrators and educational reform organizations look to the state and federal government to rectify the problems with the education system. Achieve, a national education reform organization, asserts, “State education leaders have the essential job of setting the expectations for completing K- 12 education that when the expectations are met, graduates will indeed be college and career ready” (2014). Supporting this sentiment, *Claiming Common Ground*, a report on state policymaking for college readiness and success, more expressly recommends the following transformations:

The quality and level of the coursework and instruction and their level of alignment with postsecondary expectations, are the key elements of reform...improvements in these areas requires that colleges and universities participate in the new wave of high school reforms, so that new standards and curricula in high school are linked to what students need to know and be able to do in college. (Institute for Educational Leadership, 2006, p.7)

State governments should consider setting requirements or implementing incentives to increase communication and collaboration between secondary and postsecondary systems. Generally,

most state financial systems perpetuate a division between the two education systems (Institute for Educational Leadership, 2006). To stimulate secondary and postsecondary collaboration, policy makers could use financial incentives to encourage communication about educational issues and gaps between the two systems. One example of a state where secondary and postsecondary collaboration has taken off is Kentucky. The Kentucky Council on Postsecondary Education has adopted statewide reading, writing, and mathematic standards for college readiness, graduating high school seniors who demonstrate proficiency are guaranteed placement in credit-bearing course at any public college (California Community College Practitioners, 2009). Alignment of academic standards eases the transition for college-bound students by better preparing them to meet the academic expectations through overall improvement in college readiness.

### **Higher Education Communication of Expectations**

The responsibility of aligning high school curriculum and content with the expectations and demands of college does not solely fall with secondary teachers, administrators, and policy makers. While institutions of higher education may not have direct influence on secondary curriculum (California Community College Practitioners, 2009), they are responsible for assisting incoming students with the development of institution-specific expectations, which will ultimately impact persistence and retention (Braxton et al., 1995). Tinto affirms four major conditions that are associated with enhanced student retention: expectations, support, assessment and feedback, and involvement (2012). Within the condition of expectations, two elements are necessary: the establishment of high performance expectations and consistency and clarity in communication of these expectations. Students are more likely to be retained and persist to graduation when their educational intuitions expect for them to succeed (Tinto, 2012). The



communication of clear and consistent expectations starts with recruitment through orientations and persists through graduation. Students start to form expectations of institutions as early as the recruitment process, and therefore it is imperative for admissions staff members to communicate a truthful representation of what students can expect. Greater transparency about the campus environment and performance demands results in students selecting an institution in which they will and ultimately lead to greater retention (Bowman & Denson, 2014). Other members of the campus who are responsible for shaping expectations include faculty.

College students increasingly come to college with misinformed expectations, specifically concerning academics (Pleitz et al., 2015). In a longitudinal study by Crisp et al.(2009), researchers explored the areas in which college students' expectations do not align with the realities of college practices. The study is unique in that it conducted focus groups with faculty members to review the expectations students held, particularly of academics. A few student expectations surprised faculty members: professors reading drafts of papers, week-long turnaround time for assignments and test grades, and readily available access to faculty for consultation (Crisp et al., 2009). Members of the faculty focus group agreed that the insight from the study would serve as an excellent source to engage students in dialogue regarding the development of aligned expectations (Crisp et al. 2009). The classroom is the only regular environment students have to interact with other students and faculty members; professors should use class time advantageously to engage students in dialogue about academic demands and expectations. Faculty members are not only helpful in advancing the dialogue about expectations; they also are instrumental in carrying out the first element of Tinto's expectation: setting high academic performance expectations (2012). An analysis of data from the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) and Faculty Survey of Student Engagement (FSSE)

revealed that in institutions where faculty members emphasize certain education practices, students were more likely to engage in those practices to a greater extent (Kuh, Laird & Umbach, 2004). In other words, faculty who required students to engage in more academically-challenging activities resulted in students reporting their college experience to be more academically challenging. Faculty members are important agents in shaping academic performance and expectations about the college experiences.

Institutional programs offered through Student Affairs divisions are also responsible for helping students acclimate to the campus and develop expectations that are reflective of the demands students will encounter. Kuh (2009) claims, “By identifying the gaps between entering students’ expectations and their level of engagement in the first year of college, institutions can target their efforts to create educationally effective programs for new students” (p.697). Orientation serves as one of the most common programs and assists students with their transition to college. The information highlighted during orientation can further promote awareness about the demands and expectations students will soon face. Other common first-year programs include first year experience courses, typically referred to as FYE 101; and functions as an extended orientation. Students who participate in first year experience courses are more likely to report being challenged academically, perceive the campus environment to be supportive, and gain more overall from their first year of college (Kuh, 2007). Although programs such as orientation and first year experience courses are useful in helping students succeed in their transition, they are not sufficient. Early warning systems are necessary for colleges to proactively catch students who may be struggling (Kuh, 2006). Colleges should use early warning systems to proactively determine student success by gauging how students feel about a variety of areas such as: educational commitment, resiliency, social comfort, campus engagement, academic

engagement, and academic self-efficacy Kuh et al., 2008). When students score low in these areas it should serve as a flag to college officials that those students require assistance to understand the social and academic realities of college.

### **Relevant Theory Research**

#### **Self-Efficacy Theory**

Researchers have closely linked academic performance and academic expectations to self-efficacy, which refers to an individual's perception of his or her ability to act in a certain way to assure a certain outcome (Bandura, 1997). Within the past two decades, there has been a movement to use psychology theories, such as self-efficacy, to better understand college student retention and persistence. Self-efficacy has been link personal goals including academic, academic performance, and academic expectations in college students.

Wood and Locke (1987) utilized the self-efficacy magnitude (SEM) to gauge self-efficacy and academic tasks. They found a significant relationship between self-efficacy, academic performance, and academic grade goals (Wood & Locke, 1987). A limitation of the study is the process for measuring academic grade goals; researchers treated it as one task instead of measuring the many complex tasks (studying, class attendance, taking, etc.) necessary to achieve grade goals. Supporting these findings, Mone, Baker and Jefferies explored the validity of self-efficacy versus self-esteem for predicting personal goals and individual performance (1995). The study found self-efficacy is the strongest predictor, accounting for 44% of the variance in personal goals. These findings suggest, "it may be considerably more effective to increase personal grade goals and academic performance through changes in self-efficacy rather than self-esteem" (Mone et al., 1995). Higher education faculty and staff members who

wish to develop college students' personal goals may find interventions focused on improving self-efficacy as most effective.

Expanding the knowledge of self-efficacy, Zajacova, Lynch and Espenshade (2012) examine the effects of academic self-efficacy and stress on grades and persistence. The results of the study revealed that academic self-efficacy had a strong positive effect on freshmen grades. While self-efficacy and stress accounted for 33% of the variance in GPA, self-efficacy was the strongest predictor of GPA (Zajacova et al., 2012). The findings of this study indicate colleges and universities should identify students who have low academic self-efficacy and provide resources to assist them in developing high academic self-efficacy.

Supporting earlier self-efficacy findings, research conducted by Chemers, Hu and Garcia (2001) found a direct and indirect relationship to academic performance and overall adjustment to college. Additionally, Chemers et al. (2001) found a significant relationship between self-efficacy and academic expectations. Students who entered college with higher expectations for academic success had higher academic performance (Chemers et al., 2001). Thus colleges that measure incoming students' self-efficacy levels have predictive information about how students will respond to demands of college life. Due to the significant relationship between self-efficacy and academic performance, GPA, and expectations, college student retention theorists Bean and Eaton have incorporated self-efficacy into their psychological model for college student retention. Bean and Eaton (2001) believe, "the factors affecting college student retention are ultimately individual and that individual psychological processes form the foundation for retention decision". Particularly with self-efficacy, Bean and Eaton argue that when students feel more competent they persist to higher a level (2001) which ultimately impacts their overall success.

## Psychological Contract Theory

The psychological contract theory draws on knowledge from the fields of psychology and business, specifically looking at employee/employer relationships. Rousseau (1989) describes psychological contract theory as “an individual’s belief regarding the terms and conditions of a reciprocal exchange agreement between that focal person and another party” (p. 123). While researchers have primarily applied the psychological contract theory to organizational management, a few applications of the psychological contract theory in higher education exist.

The Pletiz et al. (2015) study explores the discrepancy between expectations and experiences within academic and social domain for college students. The study used the psychological contract as a theoretical framework, drawing on the similarities between workplace turnover and student attrition. Pletiz et al. claim, “While employees and business both establish an implicit set of expectations (e.g.; a fair and respectful working environment), students and institutions may also establish a similar set of expectations” (2015, p.90). The study found that college students bring with them expectations in three general areas: academics, social, and institutional. The study further found students who reported a high discrepancy between expectations and experiences were more likely to leave (Pletiz et al., 2015). The research team related their findings back to the psychological contract theory, arguing that the institution failed to fulfill its part of the contract by not accurately depicting the environment the student expected (Pletiz et al., 2015). The use of the psychological contract theory highlights the importance of calibrating student expectations with the expectations of the institution.

Miller, Bender, Schuh (2005) also use the psychological contract theory in *Promoting Reasonable Expectations*; the authors discuss the theory in chapter two, which explains why student expectations are significant. The chapter highlights conditions that are essential to the

psychological contract theory. First, a contractual relationship is established between students and the institution when the university admits the student through the formal admission process. Second, there is a reciprocal exchange of services/actions of values, for example students pay tuition in exchange for access to classes, professors, grades and class credits. Lastly, terms of the contract are subjective, that is not all expectations between the students and the institution are shared with precise clarity and it is likely that not all students will enter with the same understanding of the contract (Miller et al., 2005). Overall Miller et al. clearly articulate the many transferable ways the theory applies to college students' expectations in higher education.

Several other researchers have incidentally explored aspects of the psychological contract when considering the implications of violated student expectations. Kreig (2013) examined the relationship between expectations, experiences, and stress, using the terminology 'violated expectations' to describe when students' expectations did not match their experiences. The study revealed that when students' expectations did not match their experiences, student reported increased levels of stress (Kreig, 2013). The findings in this study support the findings from business management literature; a "psychological contract breach can be conceived as a stressor that alters the quality of the employee – organization relationship and depletes individuals' organization –related resources" (Lapointe, Vandenberghe, Boudrias, 2013, p. 535). This particular example highlights one of the many ways in which researcher can apply the psychological contract theory to further understand and expand knowledge about college students' expectations.

### **Opportunities for Literature Expansion**

An overview of the literature related to first-year college students' development of academic performance expectations indicates that previous academic achievement is a strong

predictive factor for future academic achievement. We also know that the largest discrepancy between expectations and experiences lies within academic rigor; specifically, a majority of students largely overestimate their course grades and overall academic performance. The level of academic self-efficacy one possesses significantly influences the development of personal academic goals and expectations. However, what researchers have not explored is how college students develop academic expectations. Pleitz et al. (2015) notes, “Specific questions that warrant further research include a deeper analysis of exactly how students expectations develop” (p. 101). In addition to how students develop expectations, it is important to understand the factors first year college students consider while developing expectations. Thus, a large deficiency remains in the content knowledge of academic performance expectations. Researchers have conducted much of the research exploring college student expectations through quantitative methods, limiting the understanding of expectations. Smith and Wertlieb suggest, “Future examinations of expectations and experiences should involve a strong qualitative component, where in addition to completing multiple surveys over time, students are asked to tell their first-year story” (2005, p. 168). The intention of this study is to utilize qualitative methods to further explore the development and impact of college student expectations on students’ success.

## **CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH**

### **Overview**

The methodology section includes an overview of the researcher's epistemological approach, study design, a description of the sample and population, a review of the instrument, and the data analysis process for the proposed study. This research study employed several qualitative research methods to collect descriptive information to better understand phenomena of interest. The proposed mythological approach also incorporates triangulation to ensure validity and trustworthiness of the research findings. Lastly, the methodology section will conclude with ethical considerations and potential limitations.

### **Epistemological Approach**

Epistemology begs the fundamental question: how do we as consumers and creators of knowledge come to know truth? Essentially there are two positions through which the inquirer comes to know reality: objectivism and subjectivism. Objectivists believe there is a knowable reality that exists, which researchers must discover through identifying patterns without influence from the inquirer (Daly, 2007). On the other hand, subjectivists believe a knowable reality exists; however, the inquirer constructs knowledge through the meaning making process (Daly, 2007). For me, I best understand the relationship between objectivity and subjectivity as a continuum with strict objectivist and subjectivist situation at either end with variations of knowledge creation situation in-between. As a constructivist, I believe knowledge is a co-constructed process through which the subject participants' experiences and realities are at interplay with the researchers' own subjectivity. Both subjectivism and objectivism can contribute to constructivism; Daly (2007) notes, "the constructed outcome thereby includes multiple subjective experiences (including the researcher's) and the presentation of a patterned



reality consisting of shared meaning that at least hints at the presence of an objectively available external reality” (p. 25).

As a constructivist, I believe that knowledge is: individually constructed, shaped by our experience and understanding, and highly influenced by human interactions. From a constructivist perspective, the focus is less on ‘what is real’ and more on how participants make meaning of a particular event at a given point in time. Because the meaning making process is contingent on the individual’s current understanding, experiences, and bias, the construction of knowledge is fluid (Daly, 2007). An epistemology grounded in constructivism depends largely on seeking out multiple interpretations of truth. As a constructivist I seek to understand the phenomena at hand from multiple perspectives through multiple methods of inquiry. This process aligns nicely with the philosophical underpinnings tied to case study methodology, the chosen methodology for this study. Yin (2012) and Stake (1995) have approached case study from the constructivist paradigm, allowing researchers to explore a phenomena within its context and through various methods of data collection (Baxter & Jack, 2008). As the researcher I play an instrumental role in shaping and communicating the experiences shared by the participants. Therefore, I must be transparent about the role of ‘the self’ throughout the entirety of the research process, especially in the results section.

### **Purpose of the Study & Research Questions**

The purpose of this study is to understand how first year freshmen develop expectations of their academic performance in the first semester of college and comprehend the implications of those expectations. I utilize a case study methodology to further explore the phenomena at hand. A case study is designed to conduct “An empirical inquiry about a contemporary phenomenon, set within its real-world context – especially when the boundaries between

phenomenon and context are not clearly evident” (Yin, 2009, p.18). I selected the case study approach for two primary reasons: emphasis on context and encouragement to use multiple methods of data collection. The case study approach allows the researcher to explore complex phenomena by examining the case in the context of its environment (Baxter & Jack, 2008). The development of first year student expectations depends on the environment of the college the student attends. While incoming first year students bring expectations with them to college (NSSE, 2015); informal and formal interactions as well as communication from the college will likely influence further development of the expectations. Case study research leads to an integrated and holistic comprehension of the case, which is the second reason I selected this methodology. An integrated and comprehensive understanding of the case is accomplished by utilizing multiple methods of data collection such as: document analysis, archival records, interviews, direct observation, participant observation, and physical artifacts (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Yin, 2003). The study will collect data through interviews, document analysis, and direct observation.

Defining the case is an essential part of conducting the case study; a case is generally thought of as a “bounded entity (a person, organization, behavioral condition, event or other social phenomenon), but the boundary between the case and its contextual condition – in both spatial and temporal dimensions – may be blurred” (Yin, 2012, p.6). For the purpose of this study, the researcher will conduct a single embedded case study (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2012), focusing on academic expectations bound to first year students attending Southern Flagship University. In the case study, the main unit of analysis will be academic expectations with two embedded units (also known as nested units, Yin, 2012). The first embedded unit will evaluate how first year students develop academic expectations; the second embedded unit will evaluate

how Southern Flagship University communicates academic expectations through the admissions and orientation process. The embedded units are situated within the larger case and allow for the analysis of data within, between, and across the embedded units (Baxter & Jack, 2008), thus allowing for a stronger illumination of the main case. The benefits of conducting a case study permit the researcher to comprehensively understand the phenomena by examining the context and conditions surrounding the case and embedded units. Through case study inquiry with the implementation of interviews, document analysis, and observation methods, the study aims to answer the following questions:

- How do first year college students develop academic performance expectations?
- What are the differences in how first year students develop academic performance expectations based on their prior academic performance (high school GPA and ACT/SAT scores)?
- How does the university communicate academic expectations held for first year students through the admissions and orientation process? What academic expectations does the university communicate?

These questions will be addressed through the study design detailed below.

### **Study Design**

Below are the details of the study design including: a description of the study site, sampling, participant selection, data collection, and analysis.

#### **Site of Study**

The proposed study will take place at Southern Flagship University (SFU), a large four-year public and research one institution located in the southern region of the United States. SFU is the flagship institution in Southern State with an undergraduate population of approximately

25,500 students. SFU was selected due to the dire financial situation facing higher education in Southern State and the challenges SFU faces with student retention, particularly freshmen retention. The 2013 freshmen retention rate was 84.6% (SFU Budget & Planning, 2014) compared to the national retention rate of first-time undergraduates at 71.4% (U.S. Department of Education, 2014). While these numbers might appear positive at first glance, when the SFU retention rate is compared to other universities with similar characteristics, the numbers indicate otherwise. For example, in 2013, SFU ranked number 10 out of 13 amongst peer institutions with a retention rate of 84.6%. Maryland University had the top retention rate with 95.7%, and Mississippi State University had the lowest retention rate with 80.2% (Consortium for Student Retention Data Exchange, 2015). On a national level, out of the 50 states' flagship universities, SFU ranks number 33 for student retention (Allen, 2016). While these numbers indicate SFU is making an effort to increase student retention, there is still much room for improvement. Student retention, and ultimately persistence, to graduation is imperative for a public institution like SFU due to the lack of state funding dedicated towards higher education. This is especially true in a state where direct state funding to higher education has decreased from 885 million dollars in 2008 to 405 million dollars in 2015 (Russell, 2016). The disinvestment in higher education has led to a greater dependency to retain students in order to secure consistent revenue streams and urgency for SFU administrators to showcase good stewardship of state funding as evidenced by student retention and graduation rates.

### **Sampling & Participant Selection**

The study employed purposeful sampling procedures to identify first year students who meet the criteria for the research questions. Specifically, the researcher used maximal variation sampling to select participants differing in their prior academic performances (Creswell, 2015;

Baxter & Jack, 2008). The researcher identified participants based on their high school GPAs and their standardized ACT/SAT test scores. To provide robust insights into the process of how first-year college students develop academic expectations for their first semester, the researcher sought a diverse sample size of  $n = 10$ . Of the ten participants, five fit the category of having a relatively higher high school GPA and SAT/ACT scores ( $\text{GPA} > 3.3$ ; ACT composite score  $> 26$ ), and the other five participants fit the category of having a moderate to low high school GPA and SAT/ACT score ( $\text{GPA} < 3.2$ ; ACT composite score less than 25). The researcher based the academic criteria for these groups on the SFU admissions standards, applying freshmen must have a 3.0 high school GPA and a 22 composite score on the ACT or an 1100 for the SAT. The number of 10 participants was selected to provide a diverse insight into the phenomena at hand. Additionally, all participants were traditional freshmen, where freshmen is defined as a student who has graduated from high school and has not attempted college course work (SFU Undergraduate Admissions, n.d.); and traditional, defined as a freshman student between the age of 18-20.

To select participants, the researcher utilized data from the Student Strengths Inventory, an assessment administered by the SFU Division of Student Affairs. The Student Strengths Inventory is required by all freshmen enrolled at SFU. The researcher gained permission to use this data in the selection of participants. Specifically the researcher used four variables from the Student Strengths Inventory: student name, student email address, student high school GPA and student ACT/SAT score. The researcher sorted student data into two different groups. The *Above* group encompasses students with a 3.3 or higher high school GPA and a 26 or higher ACT composite score. The *Below* group encompasses students who have a 3.2 or lower high school GPA and a 25 or lower ACT composite score.

After sorting the student data into two groups, the researcher then randomly generated a list of 200 students from each group. An invitation to participate in the research study was sent to a total of 400 students (200 below, 200 above). A total of 52 students responded to the request for participation. From the 52 students who signed up to participate in the research student, the researcher selected five students from the *Above* group and five students from the *Below* group. Students were selected with the intention of capturing a diverse participant pole. The ten students were sent an email to schedule a time for a 30-minute individual interview during the first two weeks of the Fall 2016 semester. Students receiving email invitations were not informed of the two group criteria, rather students were generically asked to participate in a freshmen college academic expectations research study.

There were a total of ten students who participated in the reach study; all were first year freshmen attending Southern Flagship University. Table 3.1 presents a brief introduction to each participant including basic demographic information shared by participants during the reach interviews. Participants are listed by research group first the five students in the *Above* group and then the five student in the *Below* group. Participants have been assigned pseudonyms to protect participant identity.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

The integrated and holistic comprehension achieved through case study inquiry is a result of having multiple sources of evidence (Yin, 2012). The research study draws upon three methods: interviews, document analysis, and observation. The researcher conducted semi-structured interviews with each of the ten participants of the study. Semi-structured interviewing was selected for the flexibility it provides the interviewer. Daly (2007) writes, “one of the chief advantages of a semi-structured approach was that the questions served as a touchstone that

helped to maintain some level of focus while at the same time allowing for the flexibility to follow the conversation as it unfolded uniquely in each interview” (p.145). This type of interview complements the case study inquiry by allowing the researcher to gain insight into how the participant constructs reality (Yin, 2012).

Table 3.1  
*Summary of Participant Demographic Information*

Group	Name	Incoming GPA	ACT Score	Age	Race	Gender	Hometown	High School Type	Intended Major
above	Peter	3.8	28	19	White	M	Covington, LA	Public	Chemical Engineering
above	Alexis	3.3	29	18	Black	F	New Orleans, LA	Public	Wild Life Ecology
above	Jon	3.8	28	18	White	M	Central, LA	Public	Pre-Pharmacy
above	Andrew	3.8	34	18	White	M	Dothan, AL	Public	Math and Physics
above	Bianca	3.8	31	18	White	F	Lake Charles, LA	Public	Biology
below	Dinorah	3.2	18 (980 SAT Score)	18	Black	F	Atlanta, GA	Public	Petroleum Engineering
below	Emma	3.2	22	18	White	F	Covington, LA	Public	General Business
below	Martin	3.1	25	18	Asian	M	Baton Rouge, LA	Magnet	Pre-Nursing
below	Kallen	3.1	22	18	Black	F	Atlanta, Georgia	Public	Political Communications
below	Beck	3	23	18	White	M	Ponchatoula, LA	Public	Athletic Training

The researcher used individual semi-structured interviews to gain insight and perspective into how college students develop academic expectations for their first semester of college. A copy of the interview questions can be found in Appendix A. The researcher aimed to answer the first two-research question through the individual interviews:

- How do first-year college students develop academic performance expectations?

- What are the differences in how first year students develop academic performance expectations based on their prior academic performance (high school GPA and ACT/SAT scores?)

The researcher also collected participant information via a “Research Participant Information Sheet” (Appendix B) capturing mainly demographic information. Demographic information included: age, intended academic major, high school GPA, name of high school, type of high school and hometown. The information from the survey helped the researcher identify further differences between the two participant groups. As a part of the survey, participants also identified all of their Fall 2016 semester classes and the corresponding letter grade the student realistically believed they would earn in each class. Additionally, the consent to participate form asked for participants to provide the researcher with permission to access final course grades from the university’s register’s office. A summary of the participant’s expected grades versus actual final grades for their Fall 2016 classes is provided in the findings section of this dissertation.

After conducting the interviews and collecting data via the Research Participant Information Sheet the researcher transcribed all the participant interviews. Before coding transcriptions, the researcher reviewed field notes to develop a preliminary list of ideas and themes. The researcher took two types of field notes: descriptive field notes and reflective field notes. Descriptive field notes captured a sense of what happened during the interview, the participant’s general mood and response, and the overall environment. The researcher also took reflective field notes after each of the interviews to note themes and ideas that have emerged (Creswell, 2015). Field notes serve as a great starting place to remind and refresh the researcher about various elements of the interviews as well as to develop initial themes.



After the researcher reviewed the field notes and transcribed the interviews, the researcher read the transcriptions twice to develop codes. During the third review of the transcription the researcher wrote down overall themes on a post-it note for each transcription (Marks, 2015). Once this process was completed, the researcher reviewed all of the codes listed on the post-it notes and identified themes across all interviews. Each participant's response was compared and connected to the other responses allowing for themes and categories to emerge. After establishing the themes, the researcher utilized an excel worksheet, creating a sheet for each theme and sub-theme. The excel sheet was used to categorized quotes by themes to further aid in the data analysis process. The second part of the data collection will focus on addressing the last research question through the use of document analysis and observations:

- How does the university communicate academic expectations held for first year students through the admissions and orientation process? What academic expectations does the university communicate?

The researcher conducted document analysis and observations to examine what academic expectations the university communicates and how it does so. Document analysis is “a systematic procedure for reviewing or evaluating document – both print and electronic material” (Bowen, 2009, p.27). Through this process the researcher found, selected, and appraised documents most commonly utilized during the recruitment, admission, and orientation process for first year students. The researcher reviewed documents to gain a comprehensive understanding of expectations, evaluating the documents for completeness or selectivity of information (Bowen, 2009). Through document analysis, the researcher yielded findings in the format of quotes and excerpts, which the researcher organized into major themes and categories.

The researcher seeks to use the themes to corroborate the findings from other sources of data collection.

Lastly, the researcher used observations to gain insight into how the university communicates academic expectations during summer orientations, which the university requires all first year students to attend. Observations involve “gathering open-ended firsthand information by observing people and places at a research site” (Creswell, 2015, p.211). The researcher attended two summer orientations sessions to observe how the university communicates expectations and which ones it communicates. Specifically, the researcher was concerned with how university administrators communicated academic expectations throughout the two-day orientation. The researcher conducted observations as a complete observer, meaning the researcher undertook the role as an outside observer and did not inform the students, parents, or staff attending orientation they are being observed (Johnson & Christensen, 2014). The researcher collected data in the form of field notes. Field notes are written words recorded during the observation period (Creswell, 2015). These notes were written down during and after the observation. Additionally, during the observation, the researcher recorded descriptive field notes; these notes describe the environment and setting of the event observed.

Data analysis is the process of selection, interpretation, and decision-making (Daly, 2007). Similar to other qualitative methodologies, case study data analysis occurs throughout the entirety of the research. However, case study data analysis takes many forms; Yin (2012) suggests four analytic techniques: pattern matching, explanation building, time-series analysis, and replication (applied only to multiple-case studies). For this research study, the researcher selected an analytical technique based upon the intentions of the initial research questions. With this in mind, the analytical technique of explanation building most closely aligns with the

intention of the research. However, Yin (2012) cautions that analytic strategies may need adjustments as the researcher collects data. Navigating the analysis of data also requires an important distinction between analysis and interpretation (Daly, 2007). Where analysis is the process of identifying or separating ideas and concepts into component parts, interpretation is the process by which the researcher makes meaning of the component parts. Analysis and interpretation are constantly at interplay; it is through this reiterative process that the researcher attempts to understand the broader phenomena.

The multiple methods of data collection commonly found in case studies allow for triangulation to naturally occur. Triangulation is “the process of using multiple perspectives to clarify meaning, verifying the repeatability of an observation or interpretation” (Stake, 1995, p. 454). The researcher utilized triangulation to strengthen the credibility of the research findings.

Triangulation is

Based on the premise that we can best understand experiences when we take multiple standpoints, use multiple sources of data and examine phenomena at different level of analysis. Triangulation serves as a tool to clarify meaning by evaluating the multiple perspectives gain through the various methods of data collection (Daly, 2007, p.256). The study utilize two methods of triangulation: data triangulation and method triangulation. Data triangulation aims to collect multiple accounts of the phenomena and method triangulation involves using multiple methods of data collection.

### **Subjectivity**

Credibility of data is also ensured through reflexivity (Daly, 2007), which accounts for how the researcher (the self) brings meaning to the research and contributes to the greater knowledge community. If knowledge is socially constructed, the researcher contributes to the reader’s construction of knowledge through the researcher’s experiential and contextual accounts of the case study (Stake, 1995). It is therefore the researcher’s responsibility, as the instrument of

data collection, to forthrightly communicate how the researcher utilized methods throughout the study and provided insight into the researcher's scientific integrity. Daly (2007) argues the researcher can accomplish this by including indications of the following: how personal experiences led to line of inquiry, how the researcher chose participants, how the researcher generated key findings, and how the researcher incorporated meaning making strategies. The researcher aims to practice reflexivity throughout the research process by documenting reflective notes and communicating the researcher's subjective in the research findings.

### **Ethical Practices**

The research study was submitted to the Institutional Review Board (IRB) and granted approval by the researcher's institution of study. The IRB formal approval may be found in Appendix C. In accordance to the IRB ethical practices each participant was offered the opportunity to create an alias. Additionally, the researcher has not used personal identifying information, such a student identification numbers. Beyond these protective measures, the researcher took careful measures to safeguard participant information, such as storing all information on a personal computer, which required password to access. The password was not stored physically or electronically. Lastly, the researcher communicated the participants' rights during the study via the review of participant consent form (Appendix D). During this the researcher informed participants that they may choose to leave a question unanswered or stop their participation at any time in the study.

### **Limitations**

There are a few anticipated limitations of the study. A common criticism of case studies is the lack of generalization (Yin, 2012) due to the highly contextual nature of single case studies. However, Yin (2012) remarks that researchers can generalize case studies through

analytic generalizations. Analytic generalization is the use of “a study’s theoretical framework to establish a logic that might be applicable to other situations” (Yin, 2012, p.18). While the generalization of the study may be limited, the researcher aims to achieve analytic generalization. Another anticipated limitation includes a restriction of the perspective represented through student participants due to the small sample size. The researcher attempted to provide a diverse representation of perspective; however, was limited by the students who agreed to participate in the study. Lastly, the researcher utilized data that is self-reported by students to select the final participants. Self-reported data raises questions of reliability and therefore could be considered a limitation.

### **A Note About the Findings**

Chapters four, five and six present the research findings along with the corresponding discussion, rather than writing about discussion in the final chapter. This approach has been selected to enhance the reader’s engagement in the understanding of the research findings. The three findings chapters address one of the three research questions respectively, highlighting the main themes and subthemes. Chapter four speaks to the main research question, revealing several insights into how first year college students develop academic performance expectations. Chapter five evaluates differences in how first year college students develop academic performance expectations based on prior academic performance (high school GPA and ACT/SAT score). And lastly, Chapter six presents document analysis and observation findings related to what types of expectations the University communicates through admission and freshmen orientation.

## **CHAPTER FOUR: HOW FIRST YEAR COLLEGE STUDENTS DEVELOP ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE EXPECTATIONS**

### **Overview**

During the summer and fall semester of 2016, the researcher collected data from ten first year students at Southern Flagship University to learn how incoming college students develop expectations for their first semester academic performance. The ten students were placed into one of two groups, *Above* or *Below*. The *Above* group included students with a 3.3 or higher high school GPA and a 26 or higher ACT composite score. The *Below* group encompassed students who had a 3.2 or lower high school GPA and a 25 or lower ACT composite score. The ten students were interviewed with the same set of interview questions within the first two weeks of fall classes.

Chapter four highlights four main factors and associated sub-factors related to the main research question: How do first year students develop academic performance expectations? After reviewing participant interviews and coding transcriptions four main factors were identified:

(See Figure 4.1)

- Factor One: Identify differences between high school and college
- Factor Two: Acknowledge prior academic experiences
- Factor Three: Consider course impressions
- Factor Four: Anticipate actions required

The researcher delves into each of the four factors, highlights the various factors with significant participant quotes, and concludes by discussing findings in the context of existing literature.

Factors	• Sub-factors
Identifying difference between high school and college (10)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increase difficulty in academic rigor (10)</li> <li>• Faster pace (4)</li> <li>• Increase in personal responsibility (8)</li> </ul>
Acknowledge prior academic experiences (10)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Past academic direct or indirect experience (10)</li> <li>• Past enjoyment/interest (8)</li> </ul>
Consider course impression (6)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Class mechanics (6)</li> <li>• Faculty impressions (6)</li> <li>• Peer Influence (6)</li> </ul>
Anticipate actions required (8)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Course engagement (8)</li> <li>• Time management (8)</li> </ul>

Figure 4.1

*Summary of Factors & Sub-factors*

The parenthesis next to each factor and sub-factor represent the number of participants who identified with each factor or sub-factor.

Every college student comes to college with some expectations of what their collegiate experience will entail; the same held true for the ten research participants in this study. When participants were asked, “Generally what expectations do you have for your first semester of college?”, the overall responses revolved around the participants expecting college to be more difficult academically than high school and to include social elements. Kallen, for example, described her expectations as, “I feel like it will be a little more challenging but in a good way. I feel like I’m just going to have fun and energy wise I’m going to meet people and it’s going to be welcoming.” Participant Andrew responded, “I definitely plan on studying. And doing well in classes and hopefully making some friends – I don’t really know anybody here so.” Peter also reflected this concept of the college experience entailing both an academic and social side, and stated, “I mean the way I thought about it is, that I’m definitely here for like academic purposes. But I know college is suppose to be fun, so I expect to fun.” The participants’ responses about

their first semester expectations aligned with existing researchers such as Pleitz et al. (2015), who found that students entering college bring expectations in three main areas: social, academic rigor, and institutional characteristics.

### **Identifying Differences**

Through conversation, it became clear many of the participants recognized there would be differences between high school and college academics. In fact, participants used differences between the two academic environments as a way of developing their expectations towards their own college academic performance. All ten participants described increased difficulty in academic rigor at the college level and generally began by explaining college academics. For example, Peter stated:

I mean I expect it to be challenging, I expect to push my limits definitely, but I think I'm gonna be able to handle it. And I definitely feel like I'm gonna have to put more outside class work in.

Peter used the word challenging to describe the difference between high school and college level academics; he also recognized he would need to meet the more challenging college academic rigor with an increased level of personal effort. Beck also described college academics as more challenging, stating "It's going to be challenging but it's manageable, as long as you don't like over load yourself you should be okay..." Beck distinguished that college academics would be more challenging and therefore he anticipated the importance of not over loading himself.

In addition to college academics being more challenging, the participants also placed boundaries on the difficulty of the academic rigor by also describing college academics as manageable. Alexis used similar language in describing her expectations towards college:



Um, I think it will be hard, but it like may be rewarding if I work hard. It will be fun and like I know I'll have to balance social life and work and stuff. Umm, I think it will be just like overwhelming but in the end I think it will be fine.

Again the challenge of college was exemplified through Alexis' language of "it will be hard" and the theme of manageability was evident through the language of "in the end I think it will be fine". The participant indicated a sense of optimism in the description of college rigor being difficult yet manageable. This finding aligned with earlier research that indicated college students have distinct styles of expectations: optimistic, prepared, fearful, and complacent (Jackson et al., 2000). The style of students' expectation has played a significant role in students' adjustment to college. Jackson et al. (2000) found the adjustment levels of students with predominately optimistic expectations were less certain than those students who arrive at college with prepared expectations. Students with optimistic expectations may tend to view discrepancies between expectations and experiences more positively.

Four of the research participants illustrated the pace of college academics as significantly different between high school and college. When posed the question "What expectations do you have for academics at SFU?", Alexis responded, "I think they will be like fast pace." Expanding on the same question, Martin jokingly remarked:

Well... I knew they were going to go very quickly. But I was not wrong about that (laughter). You know it's like...you go to class twice or once and they tell you, you have a quiz or something. You know the just – I wasn't surprised yet I kind of was, I didn't think it was going happen this fast. You know I thought the first couple of days you know, you know you get to know the teacher – he might teach a lesson or two – but then it's like 'Oh, you have a quiz'.

Although Martin made light of his new academic circumstances as he described his first couple of days of classes, he emphasized that he knew the class would move quickly but still was surprised at how fast the professor progressed. Martin also hinted at the nature of the

relationships between the professor and the class, believing there would be a time period for the professor to introduce himself or herself; however he discovered the professor quickly jumped into the course material.

Bianca further elaborated on the fast pace of the college classroom:  
...every time I'm going to class there will be a lecture on something and I will be getting more information. So like there is more stress on keeping up with that, where's in high school if you're behind the teacher slows down but you just keeps going [at college].

These first year students expected college professors would move forward regardless of the students' ability to master course content. Justin validated this sentiment:

I've realized that you don't have that relationship with your teacher; they just kind of talk and if you miss it you miss it. If you write it down you write it down. They're moving not matter what – no matter if you have a question they are just going to keep going.

This relentless forward progress movement of the college classroom compared to the slower, more forgiving pace of high school painted a stark contrast of the type of academic environment incoming college students must learn how to navigate. Conley (2007) noted the faster pace of college is a fundamental difference between high school and college style of pedagogy.

Incoming first year students may be aware of the faster pace, however may struggle with responding to the change in pace.

Eight of the participants also identified the significant difference of their personal responsibility between high school and college academics and that it impacted how they expected to perform academically. When asked about the academic difference between high school and college, several participants claimed they would need to become more responsible and independent when it came to their academic performance. Alexis stated:

I don't know, it's just weird because it's a different environment so its like kind of hard...academics are kind of hard. Because you have to be really independent and like

self-motivate so I think that, umm, might affect academics. But it will be hard, but I feel like I'll be fine.

Alexis pointed out the different environment between high school and college required more independence on the part of the student. Two of the participants underscored the differences between high school and college that necessitated more student independence. First, Andrew, remarked about his high school experience:

The [high school] teachers were consistently on you about getting assignments done and making sure you had it done properly. And here [college] they [professors] tell you and then they might tell you one more time and then it's due. And if it's not done properly then it's not done properly.

Andrew suggested his high school teachers were more invested in their students completing the academic work compared to college professors, and Andrew realized completing the college course assignments became his responsibility. Kallen further elaborated:

I'm not going to say it [high school] was a lot more laid back but it was kind of. They [teachers] kind of babied you a little, and here it's kind of not like that. If you don't go to a class that's on you, you're not in high school any more – it's not I'm [college professor] going to baby you the whole way.

Kallen described what is often referred to as hand holding at the high school level; Kallen realized she would not receive the same type of hand holding from her college professors. Only one of the participants actually acknowledged a tangible action for taking more responsibility.

Bianca articulated, “I don't know, I guess to take more responsibility for education. Like studying outside of class. They've said that over and over again.” Bianca also recognized she needed to take more responsibility for her education at college, and described studying outside of class as a method of responsibility.

### **Prior Academic Experiences**

The second factor that emerged in understanding how incoming first year students develop expectations towards academics involved students using prior academic related

experiences. During the individual interviews, the researcher asked each participant to list each of their Fall 2016 classes and the corresponding final course grade the participants believed they would earn. After participants filled out this information, the researcher asked participants to share how they arrived at each of the final course grades. This part of the interview was insightful in understanding how incoming first year students develop expectations towards academic performance. Clearly, students used prior academic-related experiences to predict their future academic performance. Specifically, the participants drew upon how they performed in the same or a similar subject in high school and their previous enjoyment or interest in related content material.

All ten research participants mentioned drawing upon their past high school academic performance in determining how they expected to perform in their first semester college courses. Participants who had a previous positive experience in a subject used the information to predict a positive academic performance in college. For example, asked how he believed he would perform in his Chemistry course, Justin stated:

I actually took the non-science majors first semester in high school but I didn't do the college credit – I couldn't afford it. So already I can see that – I know this information so it's just being repeated to me. And I made an A last year, so I foresee that going pretty well.

Justin believed he would earn a final grade of an A in the Chemistry course and used his past academic performance from a similar high school class to determine his future performance.

Alexis also communicated a similar narrative regarding her college math course, claiming:

Math 1021, that's, umm, college Algebra. Umm, I think it will...well, um, I already know this stuff in math, because like I learned it in high school, so I should get an A, hopefully.

Again Alexis' prior performance from her high school math class led her to believe she would achieve an A in her college math class.

Participants also used their negative academic performance in high school as a predictor for their future collegiate academic performance. For example, when talking with Beck about his college math course, he mentioned:

Umm, Math 1021 I'm actually like retaking that class because I took that one in high school for college but I did terrible because I was lazy the whole time. And I got a D on it ...it's still considered passing but I want to get a better grade in it to kind of bring my GPA up more.

Beck expected he would be able to earn a C in his college math course based on his high school academic performance in math and he also noted his laziness as a factor. Martin also considered his past performance with English as a factor in determining how he expected to perform in college English. Martin articulated:

English is not my forte', through out high school, ya know, I had a very hard time writing. Especially with the English 1001 course – we do three analysis essays. I think my senior year of high school when I took my AP that helped me with my writing a lot but I still to a degree doubt my ability to write papers so, ya know, it might be a lower grade than a "B" so, ya know. This time I just really have to work hard because looking at the past it hasn't always worked the way I wanted it too.

Martin shared that he hoped to earn a B plus in his college English course, but he did not explicitly state the grade he achieved in the AP English class; instead he used his general comprehension and confidence about English from high school to make a prediction about his future performance in English.

Additionally, two participants did not have direct experiences with college course material in high school, but instead were able to use other personal experiences to predict their future performance. When the researcher asked Peter about how he arrived at the final course grade of an A for his Theater course, he exclaimed:

Umm, I loved theater in high school I was in musical theater and stuff so I'm definitely interested in it and it won't be a problem to keep up with it. But my teacher is really serious about it, and I'm like really bad about writing reviews so that's why I put an A.

Peter used his personal experience as a member of high school musical theater as a factor to determine how he expected to perform. Peter also mentioned factors such as the nature of his professor and the course assignments, factors that will be addressed later. Participant Andrew shared a similar experience. Andrew signed up to take Linear Equations during the fall semester in college; he took several math classes and was confident in this subject area but did not take Linear Equations in high school. Andrew revealed:

In high school I studied that by myself – like I found an MIT open courseware, and it had, umm, online, they had gone through and followed a professor and him teaching in the class the whole semester and I watch about 90 percent of that. And I read a good portion of a book on Linear Algebra. So I have pretty good faith that I'll do well in that class.

While Andrew did not take a class in high school directly geared towards linear equations, he cited his personal experiences studying the subject via an online MIT course and reading a book. This suggests that incoming students lacking direct high school academic experience with a subject use other academic related experiences to help them determine future academic performance.

In addition to participants using prior positive and negative academic performance from high school, participants also leaned on their past enjoyment or interest in a subject to determining how they expected to perform in their fall classes. Of the ten participants, eight students referenced interest or enjoyment in a subject as a factor they considered. When asked about his Chemistry class, Peter stated:

Chemistry, I put an A minus because its kind of like Chemistry is hard...and I kind of struggled with in high school but like I really enjoy it – I think it's really interesting. So I

know it's something I won't mind studying or keeping up with. But I know it's something that will be challenging also.

Peter acknowledged his Chemistry class would be hard and that he struggled with the subject in high school; despite that, he enjoyed the class and thought the material was interesting, and because of this would not mind studying for the class or completing the work. Peter mentioned both the course difficulty and his personal interest in the course subject, however it was unclear which factor Peter might consider as more important as he predicted his future academic performance.

Justin also used the term 'interesting' when describing why he believed he would earn an A minus in his history course. He remarked:

I've been very good at history but, uh, um, the – the older history that stuff the early civilizations I've been pretty good with that – so it's interesting to me. And I feel like I would want to learn more about it.

Justin's interest in history influenced his desire to learn the material; he also stated he was 'very good' and 'pretty good' with learning history. Emma also mentioned her aptitude and enjoyment for writing as a factor she considered when determining her final course grade in English. Emma claimed:

Yeah, so English is like my forte' almost, like I'm really good at English! And I like to write, and so even the first couple classes of English have been super easy for me. We've just been writing little articles or analyzing articles and it's just been really easy so. Yeah, I think I'll get an A.

Emma expressed English was a strength of hers and she also liked to write. Participants who expressed a high aptitude also expressed an interest or enjoyment in the subject, as people tend to enjoy things with which they find success. In summary prior academic experience, whether

direct or indirect, was a predominant factor the participants considered when determining their expectations of future academic performance.

### **Course Impressions**

The participants identified a third factor, course impression, which included three sub-factors: class mechanics, faculty characteristics, and peer influence. First impressions are important and these incoming freshmen used their first impressions of classes and faculty to develop their expectations. Six of the ten participants stated that course impression was a factor in deciding how they would perform academically. Martin communicated:

Even just going based off my first day in the class, ya know, and also using that as a way to kind of let me see my possible grade, ya know. I feel like the first impression of a class – it kind of lets me predict what I’m gonna make, ya know.

Class mechanics was the sub-factor in course impression with which participants frequently identified in developing their expectations. Class mechanics includes items such as depth of content covered, number of assignments, difficulty of coursework, and opportunities to earn points. When the researcher asked, “Are there other general factors you are considering when determine how you will perform academically?”, Beck responded:

Umm, another factor is the amount of work given, um, the amount of points each quiz and test is worth. Like for English I could have a paper that’s two pages long but it’s worth like five hundred points – right, and if I don’t do then, that’s five hundred points that I don’t have so it just all depends on how hard... the difficulty of the course, the difficulty of the instructor and the amount of points possible.

Beck considered several aspects about the class mechanics to determine how he would perform academically. First Beck spoke about the amount of points an assignment was worth and also mentioned the amount of points possible to be earned. Often college courses are designed to offer fewer opportunities to earn points compared to high school, where students may have a



greater number of opportunities to earn points. Emma alluded to this difference in the number assignments between high school and college:

I knew it was going to be a lot of exams – it wasn't going to be like little assignment that you turn in for little points and it was just going to be big midterms and big finals and that kind of scared me because at my high school we didn't really – it was always like little assignments and then like a little chapter test. And like things weren't cumulative so I was kind of like scared for that. To just having to like study several days and nights for a huge exam and it being like a big percentage of your grade that kind of scared me.

Emma expressed that the opportunities and venues through which students earn their grades in college are different from high school, and that high school tests covered smaller amount of class content compared to college exams. Incoming students with little to no previous exposure to the type of comprehensive testing college academics demand question their ability to successfully perform academically.

Two of the participants also mentioned the amount of work that was required for the class as a factor in deciding the grades they expected to earn. Peter claimed that he considered how much out of class work he needed to complete, stating, “Like how much like out of class I’m gonna have to work on it. Like each class tells you out of how many hours they expect for you to work outside of the classroom.” Participant Bianca added a comment about the difficulty of the course work, stating, “The less I have to do for the course like I figured I’ll get a better grade. Because like it’s easier material the less I have to review or study.” Bianca claimed the amount of work and the difficulty of the course work were factors in the amount of time she committed to studying for a class, which ultimately influenced how she expected to perform academically.

Impressions of faculty members also played a role in how students developed their academic performance expectations. Six of the participants considered various characteristics about faculty such as teaching style, ability to engage students, and personality. During her interview, Alexis commented on the topic of faculty characteristics:

Umm, what the teacher has said about the class, how the teacher teaches, how much work they give, and how they grade stuff. Because some teachers don't give tests or some teachers drop your lowest grade, like some teachers post their notes so you don't have to worry about that or it's just easier to study.

Alexis indicated that she considered how the professor teaches the class along with several of the course mechanics, such as dropping the lowest grade and how the professor handles notes for the class. This implies that some students believe the actions of the professor can make the class easier or more difficult, and that the professor may be liable for student academic performance. Beck also believed the professor had some influence on how he expected to perform in the class; he stated, "Umm, well, the professor, is one factor because if the professor is a harder professor the class is going to be harder." Increased difficulty of the class was a factor the participant believed would impact level of performance, characteristically in a negative way.

Two other participants mentioned the professor's personality as a factor contributing to their academic performance expectations. Dinorah made the following comment about her Renewable Resources professor:

Okay, well, first the professor seems really cool and she is really passionate about her job, I really like that about her. But I had to come – ya know, be realistic about the grade, like I like the class as of right now but down the road I may stumble. So that's why I gave myself a low A instead of a high A. But I'm pretty sure I'll pass because it seems interesting.

Dinorah described her Renewable Resources professor as cool and passionate, both traits that she liked about her professor. Dinorah used impressions of her professor from the first two weeks of class as a factor in determining she would receive an A in the course. Bianca also made similar comments about her Biology professor:

Uhh, that class doesn't seem very difficult from the lectures and then the teacher is also really involved, he's really great so far, he answers all my questions and emails me really fast. So I think as long as I study I'll do pretty well.

Bianca's first impressions of her Biology professor led her to believe that her professor was involved and responsive to student communication. Bianca also stated the professor was really great so far, suggesting she had a positive impression of her professor and incorporated these characteristics about the professor in deciding her final course grade.

Six participants identified using peer influence in determining what to expect about college and course rigor. Participants described the peer influence they received as more about the general college experience but also included impressions about academic experience. Emma remarked:

I had a couple friends that went here and I asked them how it was and they said like, like, it's a good school but you definitely have to study it's not going to be easy. So I knew that coming in to SFU. And people have warned me of how like how important it is to study. And that classes weren't as easy as high school classes.

Emma used comments and interactions with her peers to glean the importance of studying for her college classes, and that studying would not be the same as high school. Other participants described the peer influence they received as being more specific towards individual classes. Martin stated, "I also look at what other people tell me about those classes as well, ya know, sometimes they'll tell you that teacher's this, that teacher's that." Martin gathered information from his peers about specific classes that he considers and in determining his future academic performance. When the researcher asked Justin how he expected to perform in his Economics course he explicitly cited, "I've heard lots of bad things about that class but I like Economics." While Justin noted he likes Economics, he also considered the information he heard about the class; in this case the 'bad things' Justin heard about this class negatively impacted how Justin expected to perform in the economics class.

Finally, one participant also cited the information he gathered from his friends as a warning. Peter stated, "I have friends that are sophomores here. I know like what they went

through their freshmen year and the types of problems they had. So, umm, I plan on learning from their mistakes.” Peter planned to learn from his friend’s experiences and to avoid making mistakes his friends have made, especially academic mistakes.

### **Required Actions**

The last main factor participants identified as important in developing their future academic performance expectations were the actions required to achieve those grades. During the participant interviews, the researcher asked each participant, “What actions do you believe are necessary to achieve the grades you expect to earn?” The majority of participant responses fell into one of two categories: course engagement and time management. Eight of the participants mentioned aspects related to course engagement as influencing the developing of academic performance expectations. Course engagement included a variety of actions such as studying, reading, taking notes, attending class, etc. Beck mentioned several of these course engagement actions in his response:

Just do whatcha gotta do, take the notes, umm, pay attention, don’t go to sleep (laughter), just and actually try to learn the material. Not just know this for the test and just forget about it because it all goes hand and hand with the next section.

Beck noted that for his success he needed to take notes, pay attention in class, and learn the material versus just memorizing the material. Dinorah also communicated she needed to implement similar actions: “Well, definitely studying more, doing all of my work, going to all of my classes. Staying focused – cause I drift off easily.” Several students mentioned going to class as an action they needed to implement. Justin particularly emphasized the importance of going to class. Justin asserted, “Umm, I’m gonna have to study, do my own work, read. And, umm, show

up to class definitely – everyone has told me no matter what you show up to class.” Attending class was viewed, as a necessary action to achieve desired final course grades.

While many of the participants mentioned studying as an important action, two participants elaborated on what studying looked like for them. Andrew made the following comment about studying:

Well, definitely pick up my study habits cause in high school I developed not the best study habits. I never really had to study. And now, umm, I actually have to study – and that's new to me.

Andrew shared he never really had to study in high school and knew he needed to develop and increase his study habits coming to college, a concept that will be revisited in the discussion section.

Alexis also noted she needed to study, however, she put parameters on how much studying she would like to achieve each day. Alexi asserted, “Yeah, like how much studying I put into each class, I try to put in two a day for the classes I took that day. We’ll see how that goes.” The researcher clarified that Alexis would like to study two hours each day for each of her classes that day; if she had three classes on a Monday, she wanted to study a total of six hours that day. Overall participants identified engaging with course content and material as an important action required to achieve their academic performance expectations.

Time management was another action participants acknowledged as being imperative to their future academic success. Participants recognized there would be a difference between time management in high school compared to that of college. When the researcher asked Alexis about actions that would be necessary to achieve her academic goals she stated she would need to:

Learn how to manage time because – well, at least in college you have a lot of free time but in high school you don't - so you have to do all this work in a short amount of time.

Alexis pointed out in college she expected to have a lot more free time than high school. Justin also supported the differences in time but elaborated:

I expected to be very, very busy...and that's not exactly how it turned out to be...I find myself with a lot more free time, I don't – I'm not in classes for seven hours a day so I have breaks, I get off early, there is lots of time to work, and have band rehearsal and do my homework and I find myself with a lot of leisure time. I can use this when I actually start getting homework.

Justin expected to be busy all the time in college, and then realized he had more downtime than he originally anticipated. Justin indicated he had more free time and he planned to use this time to complete homework for his classes.

Besides recognizing the difference between free time between high school and college, participants also noted they needed to manage their time differently as well. Martin shared that he used advice from his friends to help make decisions about managing his time. Martin stated:

So, uhh, they [friends] are giving me advice and telling me how to manage my time and everything and so ya know with that I've kinda set aside work for weekends only and making sure before I ever go out with friends or anything that I make sure I have my quizzes finished, homework finished, that I'm studying and reading the material so, ya know, I'm pretty confident that I'll be able to make, ya know, those grades.

Martin decided to use his time on the weekend to complete schoolwork and prioritize schoolwork before going out with friends. Through this plan to manage his time he felt confident he would achieve the grades he predicted.

Emma also talked about balancing her academics with her social life, specifically mentioning balancing the responsibilities she would have with her Greek organization. Emma exclaimed:

I think, joining Greek life – I think there is going to be a lot of socials like grubs and exchanges and stuff and I think that may take up a little bit of time. And that is what I was kind of nervous about when rushing because I knew that SFU was difficult and that I would have to study a lot. I was kind of afraid that life would get in the way but I just have to keep telling myself that academics are more important.

Dinorah also commented on balancing academics with social life. When the researcher asked Dinorah about actions she would implement Dinorah stated, “No more procrastination. (laughter) Umm, great time management, not too many parties.” The researcher followed up asking if Dinorah had started using any tools to manage her time. Dinorah replied, “I haven’t actually. I’m still not so good with my time management, unfortunately.” The researcher asked Dinorah if she had any ideas on how she would improve her time management and Dinorah responded, “Umm, cut my social life like off – put it on hold.” Dinorah was unable to identify other methods of time management such as using a planner or to do list.

Participants identified factors that impacted the development of academic performance expectations that did not fit into the four main factors of the difference between high school and college, prior academic experiences, course impressions, and required actions. A lesser factor that students included was using academic support resources such as tutoring. Kallen mentioned using tutoring for her Spanish class:

Umm, I’m definitely going to need to go to tutorials, like the Spanish, umm, classes those tutorials for that just to make sure I’m getting help with that. Umm, definitely need to go to math lab and things like that and probably try to go to my teacher’s office hours and things like that.

Kallen also mentioned going to visit her professors to ask them questions about class material she still struggled to understand. Dinorah mentioned the cost of SFU as a factor in how she expected to perform academically. Dinorah articulated, “The cost of SFU – yeah, I – it’s a lot of money. So I feel like if I don’t do well or if I don’t succeed that’s just me wasting parents money

or yeah. So I have to do good.” Dinorah felt a sense to perform well academically because her parents were paying for her to attend SFU and she did not want to waste her parent’s money.

Another participant cited his personal motivation as a factor in how he expected to perform academically. Andrew explained, “Umm, well, I always performed well, I was like one of the top in my class...I have to do the best I possibly can. So it’s- it’s just an internal motivation to do get the best grade possible.”

Lastly, Beck mentioned his experience playing high school football as a factor: Well, playing football in high school they kind of taught us to be responsible for yourself so like if you mess up that’s on you, if you did it you take responsibility. It’s not like I can go ‘Oh it’s your fault, you messed up’. Umm... it taught me to be punctual, umm, just, uh, things that I need to make it college.

Beck planned to use the lessons he learned from playing high school football to navigate the transition to college. The participants considered a variety of factors as they developed their academic performance expectations. While most of the factors students considered aligned with the four main factors, other unique factors were also considered.

### **Discussion**

The data from the individual interviews indicated students considered four main factors when developing expectations about their academic performance. The four main factors included difference between high school and college, prior academic experiences, course impressions, and required actions, and included several sub-factors. It is important to note students consider multiple factors and often these factors intersect one another. For example a student may consider how they previously performed in high school math, while also considering their interest in math as a subject and the difficulty of the college professor. However, it is useful to know the predominant factors incoming first year students consider, as this information can help incoming students develop more realistic expectations.



The four main factors have implications on how incoming first year students develop academic performance expectations. The first factor students identified was the difference between high school and college. A review of high school to college transition literature also indicated differences between the two educational sectors, differences better known as the college readiness gap. (p. 3). The disparity in skills and knowledge can be contributed to differences in pedagogy, academic rigor, and knowledge assessment style. The literature also indicated a different in pace at which content is covered and autonomy of academic work. The Standards for Success (2003) found that college courses not only move at a faster pace but students are also required to cover a greater amount of content, such as reading eight or nine books in the same time students are required to read one book in high school.

Additionally, a successful transition from high school to college requires a greater level of independence and self-motivation (Chemers, 2001). While incoming first year students are able to identify the differences between high school and college, many still do not have the skills needed to traverse their new academic environment (Conley, 2007b). It is one thing for incoming first year students to recognize college will be more academically rigorous, move at a quicker pace, and require more independent work, and another for first year students to know how to navigate those differences. Without the proper knowledge, skills, and tools to handle their new academic environment coming into college, the questions begs where will students develop the skills and tools to succeed academically in college?

Incoming first year students have some understanding of the types of actions and tools they will need to utilize to meet their academic performance expectations. Research participants identified several actions that would aid them in their successful transition to college. Actions included reading before attending class, attending class, taking notes, studying outside of class,

and managing time. However, when the researcher asked participants about the difference between high school and college studying and study skills, five of the participants stated they rarely or never studied in high school. For example, Andrew claimed:

Well, definitely pick up my study habits cause in high school I developed not the best study habits, I never really had to study. And now, umm, I actually have to study – and that's new to me.

Justin also commented on his lack of studying in high school:

Oh, it's going to be traumatically different. I didn't study very much in high school. I still had a 4.1 GPA at the end of the year. But I do understand that now I'm gonna put it in gear.

It is concerning that five participants communicated that they never or rarely studied, but also identified studying as necessary for academic performance. Incoming first year students who did not or rarely studied in high school are likely to struggle when attempting to implement study skills necessary for college academics.

When comparing the literature to the actions the participants identified as necessary for academic success, the actions the participants identified were rudimentary. The literature acknowledges the actions the participants mentioned, however it elaborates upon the actions and skills and describes them in greater detail. According to The National Research Council (2002), students need to call upon critical thinking skills such as making inferences, supporting arguments with evidence, solving complex problems that have no obvious answers, and generally thinking deeply about course content. Conley (2007b) also argued students need a high awareness of one's own performance, ability to work with peers through study groups, and persistence in the face of academic challenges. The research from Pancer et al. (2000) suggested

the detail or complexity of expectations serves as a predictor of student adjustment to college. In this case, the lack of complexity that participants expressed about the academic actions necessary for academic success suggested lower levels of cognitive readiness, including the ability to develop strategies to deal with arising challenges (Pancer et al., 2000). While not all incoming first year students may have the complexity of expectations, Pancer et al. (2000) discussed that professors and staff members can use students' expectations as a starting point for further development.

Incoming first year students generally used their prior academic experiences to develop academic performance expectations. Participants revealed they used both prior performance in related classes and personal interest in subjects based on exposure to content in high school. Research indicates prior academic achievement is one of the strongest predictors of future academic performance, accounting for approximately 25% to 33% of the variance in predicting college academic performance (Robbins et al., 2004; Pike & Saupe, 2002). Students also use their prior academic performance to predict and develop expectations about their future academic performance. However, students using prior academic performance are urged to exercise caution on two levels. First, incoming first year student should consider the fundamental difference in pedagogy, rigor, and content mastery between high school and college (Conley, 2007b). Second, students need to evaluate how much emphasis they place on past academic performance versus other factors. Students who place much emphasis on prior academic performance but do not account for increased content difficulty may develop misaligned expectations about their course performance.

To a lesser degree, participants considered their first impressions of a class and its professor when developing future academic performance expectations; additionally, slightly

more than half of the participants considered class mechanics and faculty impressions, including aspects such number of assignments, opportunity to earn points, approachability of the professor and teaching style. Students also considered peer influence about courses to develop expectations about performance in those classes. Students' expectations about college are partly shaped by social influences such as peers, family, college representatives, and social media (Pleitz et al., 2015). Incoming first year students who consider peer influences should evaluate those influences for degree of accuracy.

In summary, incoming first year students use a variety of factors to develop future academic performance expectations. Factors are categorized into four main areas: difference between high school and college, prior academic experiences, course impressions, and required actions. Students often use multiple factors to develop their academic performance expectations and may give preference to one factor over another. These four factors provide insight into the information incoming first year students view as important for their successful transition to college.

## **CHAPTER FIVE: DIFFERENCES IN ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE EXPECTATIONS**

### **Overview**

In addition to the principle research question, the researcher was also interested in identifying any differences in how the two participant groups developed their academic performance expectations. Chapter five highlights several research findings related to the supplementary research question: What are the differences in how first year students develop academic performance expectations based on their prior academic performance? In identifying differences the researcher focused on overarching differences between the *Above* group and the *Below* group rather than nuanced differences from participant to participant, which certainly existed. Through coding of transcribed participant interviews, two striking differences appeared. First, there were noticeable differences in how incoming first year students thought their high school prepared them for college. Second, differences occurred in what participants expected to earn versus their actual earned final course grades. In this chapter the researcher explores both of the differences and briefly highlights one salient similarity between the two groups.

### **Differences in Academic Preparedness**

During the individual interviews the researcher asked participants if they thought that their high school experience had prepared them to meet their college academic expectations. Through analysis of transcribed data, it became apparent participants in the *Below* group thought that their high school experiences had not fully prepared them for college academics, whereas the participants in the *Above* group thought the converse. Participants in both groups, however, claimed advance placement or dual enrollment courses contributed to their feeling prepared for college academics. The researcher presents quotes from the participants, provides insight into the

participants' individual level of college preparedness, and demonstrates the significance participants placed on advanced placement courses.

### **Below Group Research Findings**

Participants in the *Below* group thought high school had prepared them in some ways for college but not in other way. The responses from the participants provided insight into the students thought their high school experience did and did not prepare them. In response to the question about feeling prepared, Beck remarked:

Somewhat... When I took the dual enrollment classes the teachers treated it just like a college class, where like if you weren't there on time you got like you were just late, they didn't write you up for it. But if you missed the notes you had find them from somebody they didn't give them to you. There was no busy work, it was all on the computer so if you missed it, that was it. You missed an assignment that was it, you can't make it up.

Beck claimed high school somewhat prepared him for college, and he thought that his dual enrollment classes prepared him since the dual enrollment courses were treated like college courses. The researcher asked him about the ways he thought his high school did not prepare him to which Beck responded, "Most of the teachers kinda tried to like baby us." Beck alluded to the teaching styles of his high school teachers and college professor as being different and that the "baby us" style from high school did not prepare him for college.

Martin also expressed that his high school experience prepared him in some facets but not in others. Martin specified how his advance placement classes prepared him for college:

Well, there were some parts - not the entire you know high school academic prepared me for college - which some, uhh, specifically, ya know, advance placement classes, ya know, set me up for, ya know, college academics. But, ya know, its like high school - is no where near college but there are some parts where you are going to learn or it can set you up.

The researcher asked Martin in what ways he believed his high school experience did not prepare him for college. Martin replied:

Well, like how you – specifically how fast it goes. High school is very spaced out, you'll learn one chapter in two weeks – but in college you learn two chapters in one day.

Martin expressed concern about the difference in pace from high school to college; he did not believe his high school experience prepared him to meet the academic rigor demands of college.

Dinorah expressed a similar sentiment, when she was asked “Do you feel your high school experience has prepared you to meet the academic demand of college?” Dinorah replied, “Yes and No.” Dinorah explained her reasoning:

The first high school that I went too in 9th and 10th grade it was a charter school so we were like required to take AP classes. So that's the reason why I say yes it did prepare me for college. At my second high school we weren't required to take but I did take AP classes. So and my second high was like more lenient – so, yeah.

Dinorah also identified advance placement classes as a vital contributor to her feeling of preparedness for what college academics had in store. The researcher asked Dinorah if there was anything she wished she had taken from her high school experience to help her feel more prepared. Dinorah responded, “Umm, probably take my AP classes more seriously in 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> grade. Cause at that school I didn't, yeah.” Dinorah did not mention anything explicit that her high school could have done to better prepare her; instead she focused on what she could have done, like take her AP classes more seriously.

Kallen also thought that she should have taken more ownership for feeling prepared. First Kallen exclaimed, “Yes and no” when asked whether she thought that high school had prepared her for college. Kallen went on to explain:

I think that they [high school] probably could have done a better job but that also falls on me I could have pushed myself a little bit more and not and not just ‘Oh they're kind of slacking so let me slack’. I should have pushed myself a little bit more and I also feel like they could have been a little bit harder. Some of my teachers were definitely like hard

enough and they did not play, but I feel like other teachers could have done a little bit more.

Kallen believed she would have been better prepared for college if her high school teachers had been more challenging; at the same time Kallen also took some responsibility claiming she could have pushed herself more. Kallen did not specifically mention that advance placement courses helped her feel prepared for college academics, but she talked about the similarities between her advance placement classes and college courses. Kallen stated:

Umm, definitely with turning stuff in, a lot of my AP teachers, if it was not done they weren't going to take it – that was on me. Umm, testing wise if it was like, if it was a specific day and we have until this time to take it and you didn't take it – it was 'That's your test grade you didn't do it, that's on you'. Umm, definitely attendance if you come you come, if you don't, you don't. But if you are not coming you need to make sure you are getting the materials and things like that.

Kallen alluded to how her advance placement classes resembled the structure and teaching philosophy of college courses, which better prepared her for what to expect in her transition to college academics.

Emma, the last *Below* group participant, did not think that her high school experience prepared her for college academics. Emma asserted:

No, I don't think so. High school was – it was easy and it wasn't challenging and that's something – and I think I may have done it to myself because I took regular ed classes, I didn't have any dual enrollment or AP. And the reason I took regular ed because I knew that I would be able to get through the class with an A or B – I graduated with a 3.3 I think so. If I looked back I probably would have – I wish I would have challenging myself but it was so easy for me to just go in regular and get an A and know – instead of going into dual enrollment and maybe getting a C or a D. It was just kind of comforting for me to know that there would be an easy class.

Emma was the only participant in the *Below* group who did not take any advance placement or dual enrollment courses. Emma associated her lack of advance placement classes in high school as the factor for not believing that her high school experience had prepared her for college



academics. Like Dinorah and Kallen, Emma also identified that she could have taken more responsibility for preparing herself for college.

### **Above Group Research Findings**

Unlike the *Below* group, when participants in the *Above* group were asked the question, “Do you believe your high school experience has prepared you for college academics?”, all five participants claimed they thought their high school experiences had prepared them for college academics and demands. Similar to the *Below* group, participants in the *Above* group also cited advance placement courses as a source of their preparedness for college academics. In response to the question about feeling prepared for college academics, Bianca remarked:

Yeah, they offered a lot of umm AP classes at Barb [name of high school], so I took advantage of all of them that I could take. And I did really well in them – and they are pretty, as I’ve heard, pretty comparable to what a real college course is.

Bianca stated she believed her high school experience prepared her for college academics, particularly because of taking advance placement classes. Bianca also noted that she did well in her advance placement classes and from the information she heard, her advance placement classes were comparable to college courses she would encounter at the college level.

Peter also contributed taking advance placement and honor level courses as sources of feeling prepared for college. Peter explained:

I mean in high school I took honors and all AP classes... I was never in a regular course. So I definitely pushed myself in high school but even then...umm, like...I just don't know how like system...like the school system is where I'm from, so I don't know how like - I don't how intensive it was compared to SFU. But I think I'm pretty prepared. I've prepared myself mentally for it to be more challenging.

In addition to feeling prepared from advance placement classes, Peter also identified his own motivation as a driving force in feeling prepared. Even though Peter stated he thought that high

school prepared him for college, he expressed some doubt about how his high school experience will compare to what academics will be like at SFU.

Andrew also cited his advance placement and dual enrollment courses as preparing him for college. Andrew asserted:

Yeah, I mean I took a lot of the AP and dual enrollment courses and when I was – when I got high up in high school and my teachers from day one always stressed about making – about not just getting a good grade but understanding what we are learning. And making sure that we were prepared for college and I’ve had multiple teachers that have taught me for many years who have definitely stressed that making sure we know how to do well in college.

In addition to the advance placement and dual enrollment classes, Andrew also specifically noted his teachers as an integral factor in his feeling prepared to meet the academic demands of college. When asked if there were particular strategies his teachers emphasized, Andrew replied, “Umm, I can’t really remember any. I can’t remember them of the top of my head but I’m pretty sure they have ingrained something in me, somewhere.” The strategies Andrew learned from his teachers were likely second nature, actions that he did without even thinking.

The last two *Above* participants also believed their high school experience prepared them to meet the academic demands of college, however neither of these two students directly mentioned advance placement classes as the source of their preparedness. Both participants mentioned that they had taken several (4-7) advance placement classes in high school and it was possible the advance placement classes contributed to their feelings of preparedness. When the researcher asked Alexis if she thought her high school experience had prepared her for college academics, she exclaimed, “Yeah! Oh yeah!” When the researcher asked her why, Alexis responded:

Because they [high school teachers] treated us like college students. They didn't help, they didn't really hold our hands through anything, we had to do everything ourselves and be like responsible and be on top of all our grades. And learn how to manage time

because – well, at least in college you have a lot of free time but in high school you don't so you have to do all this work in a short amount of time. Umm, I don't know they just keep telling us like you need to be prepared for college and like we got a really good education and it was very liberal and well rounded I think. And everyone that came to SFU said they were prepared.

The experiences Alexis had in high school were similar to what Alexis expected to experience in college. Having experiences like learning to manage time and taking responsibility for school work in high school helped Alexis to feel prepared to meet the academic demands and expectations she actually faces at college.

The last participant, Justin, claimed his high school experience over prepared him for college. Justin stated:

I think so far my expectations – or that my understanding is that it [high school] has over prepared me. I feel like it [college] didn't meet all of the expectations that the high school had given me.

The researcher asked Justin in what sense he thought that college had not met the expectations he gained from high school. Justin responded, “Well that's where I got the idea that college was going to be this time consuming monster – that's from high school. But I get here and I realize that it's really not that bad.” Justin felt over prepared to meet the academic demands he faces in college as a result of the interactions and information he received from his high school. It may also be that Justin felt over prepared at the time of this interview that was during the first two weeks of fall classes, and his feeling of over preparedness may change.

### **Differences in Course Academic Performance**

The second significant difference between the two participant groups was the differences in what participants expected to earn in each of their fall classes versus their final earned course grades. During each of the interviews, participants were asked to list all of their fall classes in

one column and to write letter grade they realistically believed they would earn for that class in the next column. All participants gave the researcher permission to request their final course grades from the registrar's office and, after receiving the final course grades from the registrar's office, the researcher compared the participants' expected grades to the grades actually earned in each course. Through comparison of the expected grades and final course grades the following distinction was observed: the difference between the expected grade and earned letter grade was lower among participants in the *Above* group and a larger difference was observed in the *Below* group; the participants in the *Above* group were better able to accurately predict their final course grade in each of their classes than the *Below* group. The researcher presents descriptive data from the expected versus earned final course grade data, and highlights the differences between the two participant groups.

The *Above* group participants took 27 classes in a wide range of subjects during the fall 2016 semester. Of the 27 classes, none of the participants withdrew from a course. Analysis of how the *Above* group participants anticipated their final course grades revealed that four of the participants accurately predicted at least one of their final course grades on six occurrences: one participant expected to earn an A minus in a course and actually ended up earning an A minus in that course. Alexis and Andrew accurately predicted two of their fall course grades, and Justin and Bianca accurately predicted one of their fall course grades. Peter was unable to accurately predict any of his fall final grades. Additionally, two of the *Above* group participants under predicted their final expected grades on three occurrences. Alexis had two classes in which her expected final grade was actually lower than her final grade and Justin expected to earn a B plus in his Psychology class but earned an A plus. Table 5.1 provides a detail account of how

each *Above* group participant expected to perform and the actual earned grade in each of their fall semester classes.

Table 5.1  
*Above Participant Results*

Participant	Course	Expected Grade	Earned Grade	Letter Grade Difference	Expected GPA	Earned Semester GPA	GPA Difference
Peter (above)	BIOL 1201	A	C	6 lower	3.5	1.43	2.07 lower
	CHE 1100	A plus	F	12 lower			
	CHEM 1201	A minus	C	5 lower			
	MATH 1550	B	D plus	5 lower			
	THTR 1020	A	D	9 lower			
Alexis (above)	AGRI 1001	A	A plus	1 higher	3.5	3.53	.03 higher
	BIOL 1201	B	C plus	2 lower			
	Math 1021	A	A	0			
	RNR 1002	A	A minus	1 lower			
	RNR 1010	B	A minus	2 higher			
	SOCL 2001	A	A	0			
Jon (above)	CHEM 1201	A	A minus	1 lower	3.8	3.89	.09 higher
	CMST 2060	A plus	A minus	2 lower			
	ECON 2000	A	A plus	1 higher			
	HIST 1005	A minus	B plus	1 lower			
	MUS 4250	A plus	A plus	0			
	PSYC 2000	B plus	A plus	3 higher			
Andrew (above)	BASC 2010	A	C plus	5 lower	4	3.25	.75 lower
	BIOL 1201	A	B	3 lower			
	HNRS 2000	A	C	6 lower			
	MATH 2015	A	A	0			
	MATH 2085	A plus	A plus	0			
Bianca (above)	BIOL 1201	A	B	3 lower	3.8	3.15	.65 lower
	BIOL 1208	A plus	A minus	2 lower			
	CHEM 1421	A	B	3 lower			
	Math 1550	B plus	B plus	0			
	SOCL 2001	A plus	B	4 lower			

The *Below* group participants took a total of 25 classes during the fall 2016 semester that also included a wide range of subjects. Of the 25 classes, two of the participants withdrew from a class; Kallen withdrew from Math 1021 and Emma withdrew from Biology 1001. Analysis of the *Below* group revealed one of the participants was able to exactly predict their final course grades. Martin accurately predicted two of his fall course grades in English and Sociology. None of the *Below* group participants under predicted their final expected course grade; none ended the

fall semester with higher grades than what they originally expected to earn in a class at the start of the semester. Table 5.2 provides a detail account of how each below group participant expected to perform and the actual earned grade in each of their fall semester classes.

Table 5.2  
*Below Participant Results*

Participant	Course	Expected Grade	Earned Grade	Letter Grade Difference	Expected GPA	Earned Semester GPA	GPA Difference
Dinorah (below)	ENGL 1001	A	B	3 lower	3.8	2.54	1.26 lower
	GEOG 1001	A minus	C minus	6 lower			
	GEOL 1001	B plus	C	4 lower			
	MATH 1021	B plus	B	1 lower			
	RNR 1001	A minus	B	2 lower			
Emma (below)	BIOL 1001	B	W		3	2.35	0.65 lower
	ECON 2000	C plus	D	4 lower			
	ENGL 1001	A	A minus	1 lower			
	ISDS 1102	A plus	B	4 lower			
	MATH 1021	B minus	C minus	3 lower			
Martin (below)	BIOL 1201	A minus	D	8 lower	3.2	2.3	0.9 lower
	BIOL 1208	A minus	C	5 lower			
	ENGL 1001	B plus	B plus	0			
	MATH 1021	A	D	9 lower			
	SOCL 2001	A	A	0			
Kallen (below)	ENGL 1001	B	F	8 lower	3	0.62	2.38 lower
	MATH 1021	C minus	W				
	MC 2000	B minus	C minus	3 lower			
	SPAN 1152	C minus	F	4 lower			
	THTR 1020	A minus	D	8 lower			
Beck (below)	BIOL 1201	A	F	11 lower	3	0	3 lower
	ENGL 1001	C	F	5 lower			
	MATH 1021	C	F	5 lower			
	MUS 1751	A	F	11 lower			
	PSYC 2000	B	F	8 lower			

The researcher was also interested in the average difference between the participant group's expected final grades and the participants' earned final course grades. To find the average the researcher first calculated the letter grade difference between a participant's expected final grade and the participant's earned final grade. The researcher used the grading scale at SFU, a plus/minus grade scale that means students do not earn one of the five traditional letter grades of A, B, C, D, F; instead students at SFU can earn one of 12 different letter grades, for

example A plus, A, A minus, B plus, B, B minus, etc. To calculate the difference between the letter grade expected and the letter grade earned, the researcher counted the number of letter grades between. For example if a participant expected to earn an A plus in a class and earned a C, the difference would be 7 letter grades. Tables 5.1 and 5.2 show the letter grades the student expected, the letter grade earned, and the difference between those two letter grades.

On average, the *Above* group earned a letter grade that was two letter grades lower, or rather, the *Above* group over predicted their final course grade on average by two letter grades. Thus, if an *Above* group participant expected to earn an A plus in a course, they actually earned an A minus on average. Conversely, the *Below* group on average earned a letter grade that was five letter grades lower than their expected final course grade; the *Below* group over predicted their final course grades on average by five letter grades. Thus, if a *Below* group participant expected to earn an A plus in a course, they actually earned a B minus on average. Both participant groups over predicted their final earned grades, however the *Below* group over predicted final course grades by a larger number of letter grades. The *Below* group's over prediction by a larger number of letter grades may indicate a false sense of confidence and/or lack of skills to achieve their expected final course grades.

## **Discussion**

An examination of differences between the two research groups revealed two significant differences in how incoming first year students develop their academic performance expectations. The first significant difference centered on the level of preparedness the participants felt coming into to college, where the *Above* group all believed that their high school experiences prepared them for college and the *Below* group thought their high school experiences prepared them in some facets but not in others. Participants in the *Above* group may

have felt an increased level of preparedness as a result of taking more advance placement courses or honors classes that provided them additional academic skills sets. Other factors that may have contributed to levels of preparedness included non-cognitive and cognitive skills such as motivation and academic mindset (Nagaoka et al., 2013).

Both groups thought that their high school experience had prepared them for college on some level. Research from the 2015 National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) indicated first year college students rely on academic behaviors and study habits developed during high school. For example, in the 2015 NSSE survey approximately, 60% of high school students who studied more than 15 hours a week also studied 15 hour a week as a first year college student. If the research participants partially relied on their high school academic behaviors and study habits, this could provide insight as to why the *Above* group and *Below* group felt various levels of preparedness.

Participants from both groups explicitly identified advance placement courses as an aspect from their high school experiences that prepared them to meet the demands and expectations of college academics. The mission of College Board, a not-for-profit organization, which provides advance placement curriculum, aims to “connect students to college success and opportunity” (collegeboard.org, 2017). The objective of the advance placement classroom is to provide high school students with the opportunity to “examine texts, data, and evidence with great care, learning to analyze source material, develop and test hypotheses and craft effective arguments”, while seeking to engage students in “intense discussions, solve problems collaboratively and learn to write and speak clearly and persuasively” (CollegeBoard, 2014, p.5). Advanced placement classes provide students with the academic tools and study skills believed to be necessary for college academic success. While the research participants did not



communicate specifically how they thought the advance placement courses prepared them for college academics, it is likely they would have referenced the skills and knowledge gained from those courses. Participant Emma stated she did not think her high school experience prepared her for college academics and she specifically cited her lack of taking advance placement classes as a factor. Emma explained, “It [high school] was easy and it wasn’t challenging and that’s something – and I think I may have done it to myself because I took regular ed classes, I didn’t have any dual enrollment or AP. Emma continued that she could have taken advance placement classes at her high school but she chose not to because she knew she could get better grades in regular education classes.

Of the research participants who indicated their high school experience had prepared them for college, the *Above* group felt a stronger sense of preparedness than the *Below* group. The participants’ feelings of preparedness to meet the academic demands of college suggested they were prepared to achieve the grades they expected to earn in each of their fall semester classes. However, after evaluating the participant’s expected final grades versus their earned final grades, there clearly was a misalignment in their expected academic performance and actual academic performance, suggesting the participants may not have been as prepared to achieve their desired expected grades as indicated in their interviews. In the classes where the participants did not achieve their expected academic performance, participants may have faced a college readiness gap. Students with a college readiness gap encounter a “disparity between the skills and knowledge that students gain high school versus the skills and knowledge that college and universities expect” (The National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, 2010, p. 3). A healthy level of college readiness is vital for successful academic performance during the first year of college, which ultimately influences incoming first year students’ probability of

persisting, transferring, or dropping out (Allen, Robbins, Casillas & Oh, 2008). Incoming first year college students who did not received adequate academic preparation from high school may develop a false sense of confidence in their level of preparedness, leading to a misalignment of expected academic performance and actual academic performance.

Another way in which the two participant groups differed in academic performance expectations was their overestimation of their final course grades. Both research groups had some degree of overestimation for their final course grades, however the *Below* group overestimated their final course grades by a greater number of letter grades than the *Above* group. On average, the *Below* group overestimated their final course grades by five letter grades while the *Above* group on average overestimated by two letter grades. The difference in grade overestimation between the two groups was anticipated as related researchers found similar differences. Svanum and Bigatti (2006) examined college students' ability to accurately predict their final course grades and found that 70% of the students overestimated their final grades. In this research study, out of a total of 52 classes, participants correctly identifying their final course grades in only eight occurrences, six of which occurred in the *Above* group and two occurred in the *Below* group. Additionally, of three occurrences of a participant underestimating their final grade, all participants belonged to the *Above* group. Svanum and Bigatti (2006) also found students who had below a 2.1 GPA were more likely to overestimate their final course grades compared to students who had higher GPAs; again, these findings align with the findings of the current research study.

Prohaska (1994) examined how accurately students estimated their final course grades and how confident students felt about their estimation. The study found students with previous low GPAs made the largest overestimation in their final grades (Prohaska, 1994); these findings

support the findings of this study, as participants in the *Below* group or students who had lower incoming high school GPAs were more likely to have the largest overestimation of their final semester grades. Prohaska's (1994) study also examined how confident students were in the prediction of their final grades; students with previous low GPAs identified having less confidence in their academic predictions compared to students who had previous high GPAs. This researcher also asked each participant, "How confident are you that you will be able to meet your expected final grades?" In contrast to Prohaska's (1994) findings, eight of the participants in both the *Above* and *Below* group remarked they were "pretty confident" and two students who claimed they were "fairly confident" in their ability to achieve their expected final course grades. Comparison of the participants' expected final grades with their actual earned final grades suggests some participants had an idealistic sense of confidence.

Confidence to succeed academically is closely tied to self-efficacy, which has been widely studied in college success literature (Wood & Locke, 1987; Zajacova et al., 2012). Self-efficacy is "the belief in one's capabilities to organize and execute courses of action require to produce given attainment" (Bandura, 1997, p. 3). Academic self-efficacy is a student's belief in their ability to organize and implement the necessary actions to achieve the desired academic performance. Zajacova et al. (2012) examined the effects of academic self-efficacy and stress on grades and persistence, and discovered academic self-efficacy had a strong positive effect on first year students' grades. While a strong sense of self-efficacy is important for academic success Bandura (1997) emphasized an important distinction about two elements of self-efficacy: efficacy expectations and outcome expectancy. Outcome expectancy is an individual's belief that particular actions are necessary to achieve certain outcomes, and efficacy expectation is one's belief that they can successfully perform the necessary actions to produce the desire outcome

(Bandura, 1977). This distinction is particularly important in examining a participant's level of confidence to achieve their desired final course grades relative to the overestimation of those course grades. Perhaps participants were more confident in identifying the necessary actions (outcome expectancy) and less confident in their ability to successfully perform the necessary actions (efficacy expectation) to achieve the desired outcome. Incoming first year students may be able to identify necessary actions such as engagement in analyzing and applying learning; however, if first year students are not able to successfully implement these actions, the individuals' understanding of their own self-efficacy is misinformed.

In summary, two significant differences surfaced between the two participant groups. The first difference centered on the level of preparedness, where students in the *Below* group felt less prepared to meet the academic demands of college compared to students in the *Above* group. Differences in level of preparedness could be related to the high school academic experiences. Participants from both groups identified advance placement classes as instrumental in helping them to feel prepared because of the similarities between advance placement curriculum and college academics.

The second significant difference between the two groups was the level of final grade overestimation between the two participant groups; the *Below* group overestimated final course grades by a greater number of letter grades than the *Above* group. The differences in how the two participating groups developed their academic performance expectations should be utilized to develop specialized interventions to help incoming first year students develop more realistic academic performance expectations.

## **CHAPTER SIX: ROLE OF THE UNIVERSITY IN COMMUNICATING ACADEMIC EXPECTATIONS**

Many factors that influence incoming first year students' development of academic performance expectations. Primarily these influencing factors stem from a student's high school experience, family, friends, and media (Jackson et al., 2000; NSSE, 2005; Pancer et al., 2000); however, college campuses also play an important role in assisting incoming first year students with the development of realistic expectations (Tinto, 2012). For this reason, the researcher explored how the SFU admissions and orientation processes communicated academic expectations to first year students. Additionally, the researcher wanted to know what academic expectations the university communicated.

### **Admissions Document Analysis**

The researcher met with Simon, the SFU Assistant Director for Recruitment, to learn more about how the admission process communicated expectations. Simon shared that the Admissions Office communicates with perspective first year students through methods that include, direct communication with a recruitment counselor, information offered on the Admissions' website, direct mailings of interest books and brochures, and electronic communication. For this research, the researcher conducted a document analysis of two of the SFU view books. The first view book is an 18-page book that is sent to any student who expresses interest in attending SFU. The second view book is a 10-page book sent to all students who have been accepted to SFU. The researcher reviewed these two documents because they are uniform communication received by either all prospective students or all accepted students, versus other forms of communication that were individualized to students.

Document analysis of the two views books for prospective and accepted students provided insight into the message(s) SFU intends to communicate. The first view book sent to all

students interested in SFU included information about: the city where SFU is located, a list of all the academic colleges along with majors offered, admissions requirements and important dates, important facts about SFU including retention rates, student to faculty ratio, financial aid and scholarship opportunities, the value of an SFU degree, highlights of various campus programs, and information about scheduling a campus tour. The content in the first view book gives prospective students a sense of the SFU campus and why students should choose to attend SFU.

During the document analysis the researcher examined communication related to academics and what incoming first year student should expect academically. Information related to academics included a list of all the academic programs SFU offers, a statistic about the 24:1 student to faculty ratio, information about the Honors College, and study abroad programs. No information was included about the academic rigor or coursework at SFU, and therefore students' perceptions about academic expectations were limited influenced. However, prospective students may have developed expectations about their class size and those students who qualify for the honors program may develop expectations about the demands of being an honors student based on the information provided in the view book.

The second view book sent to students who are accepted to SFU includes information about: what an SFU degree means, the next steps as an incoming first year student, housing application, dining options, and highlights a select few campus resources and programs. The content of this view book is designed to reaffirm students' decisions to attend SFU and to inform students of the seven steps they need to take to become a student on the SFU campus. Steps include: applying for housing, pay the enrollment deposit, apply for financial aid, registrar for orientation, submit final transcripts, submit immunization records, and, lastly, complete registration. In examining the view book, the researcher looked specifically for communication

directly related to academics. The view book mentions that SFU offers hands-on research opportunities for undergraduates that most schools only offer to graduate students. Incoming first year students reading this information might expect that they will be presented with these types of research opportunities.

The second reference to academics is a half page section that describes the summer academic programs SFU offers. The view book describes the summer academic programs as “Summer programs allow you to get an early start on your college education – by earning course credits – and get acquainted with your field of study at SFU prior to your first year.” (SFU Bound, 2015, p. 6) The view book describes the six different summer academic programs that are offered for students who are biology, art & design, engineering, music, and theatre majors, and a program for under-represented minority students.

In addition to the information the admissions office communicates via the two view books, some incoming first year students may also receive communication from their intended Senior College, the college from which the student intends to receive their major, and from the Honors College if a student has been accepted into the Honors Program. The information communicated from those two areas might include more academic center information. While prospective and accepted students receive information from a variety of campus sources about what to expect from their SFU experience, the two view books generally lack details about what students can expect from academics at SFU.

While document analysis of admissions’ materials provides one prospective of the type of information communicated about future expectations, campus orientation is another method by which important information is communicated to students. SFU students are required to attend a two-day on-campus orientation that occurs throughout the months of June, July and August.

During the two-day orientation, students receive a plethora of information about the SFU campus and resources. Information shared at orientation is presented by various methods; the primary method of communication is large group presentations in the campus theater that include both students and parents or family members. Multiple smaller group sessions are offered also in two-hour time blocks and students can pick the session(s) they want to attend.

### **Orientation Observations**

Every student attending orientation spends time with his or her orientation group, each of which is lead by a First Year Experience (FYE) Leader. FYE Leaders are current students at SFU selected by the Orientation Staff to lead small groups of orientation students (20 – 25 students). FYE Leaders lead three small group sessions with just the students in their orientation groups. During this time the orientation leader covers topics ranging from campus resources to tips for scheduling for classes to getting involved on campus. Students also spend a few hours with their intended Senior College, the college in which they wish to major. For example, any student who wishes to major in one of the majors offered in the Business College would attend the Business Senior College Information meeting. At this meeting the dean of the college welcomes students and provides them with the details about the college's specific academic requirements.

The researcher attended and observed two different orientations to understand how expectations were communicated to incoming first year students and what academic expectations were communicated. The researcher conducted observations as an outsider and recorded descriptive field notes, which produced the following findings. Most of the information communicated during orientation did not directly relate to college academics; rather, the majority



of information shared at orientation centered on highlighting various campus resources and describing the SFU processes students need to navigate the college experience.

During orientation students had the opportunity to listen to presenters from the following offices: First Year Experience (FYE), Auxiliary Services, Housing, Registrar, Office Financial Aid, Center for Academic Success, University Recreation Center, Student Financial Management Center, Student Health Center, and University Center for Freshmen Year, and to meet with their Senior College. Some of the offices had 15 minutes to present information to students while others had an hour to present information. The presentations were designed to highlight the services provided by a particular area and also to help students determine how to navigate SFU's systems and policies. For example, the presentation by Auxiliary Services spent several minutes of its presentation on the different meal plan options offered to students and the differences between campus cash and campus point system; the presenter's comments about campus points and campus cash caused much confusion for parents and students. Financial Aid spent a majority of the presentation time reviewing important dates related to fee billing and how to complete the registration process. Information provided in these presentations was procedural as the presenters wanted to help the students and parents understand the processes they would soon be navigating.

### **Academic Expectation Observations**

The remaining observation discussion focuses on orientation sessions that included some aspect of academics, since the primary interest in observing orientation was to understand how the university communicated academic expectations. After analyzing the orientation field notes, the researcher discovered that two themes related to academic information were shared at orientation. The information shared about academics typically aligned into one of two themes:

academic process or academic rigor. Often information shared about academics related to the academic process means that orientation presenters talked about requirements, action steps, and policies needed to process through the academic system. Less often, orientation presenters talked about the academic rigor, which included general topics such as time management, utilizing academic support resources, and developing relationships with faculty members. The researcher found that the information shared about academic rigor was superficial and lacked depth about the fundamental differences between secondary and postsecondary education methodology.

To showcase the two themes, the researcher highlights the orientation observations. The orientation kicked off with a welcome from the Vice President of Student Affairs (VPSA) during which the VPSA provided incoming students with “12 Tips for Success”. The 12 tips included: Attend class & take notes, establish relationships with your faculty, learn about & use available resources, don’t procrastinate, find a mentor, join a student organization, consider a part-time job, learn to be resilient, get to know the campus, celebrate small wins, take care of yourself, and manage your time wisely; three of the 12 tips incorporated some form of academic component. The VPSA told the orientation students to attend class and while in class to pay attention and take notes. Next, the VSPA told students to build relationships with faculty, framing the need to network and students’ need to call upon the faculty members for references upon graduation. There was no mention of developing relationships with faculty members to help incoming first year students transition to college. Finally, the VPSA told students they need to manage their time, that they have 168 hours available to them in a week, and detailed the various ways in which the student can break down and allot their time during the week. Part of the suggested weekly use of time was 15 hours for attending class and 30 hours for studying (2 hours per credit hour). The suggested uses of time were intended to help students develop expectations about

how their time may be spent and specifically how much time students need to dedicate to academics. There was no mention of methods or tools for managing time or how time management may differ from high school to college. See Figure 6.1 for the break down of time activities the VPSA suggested. The VPSA's presentation approached academics primarily from the academic rigor theme, however, academics were superficially addressed rather than providing deeper comprehension.

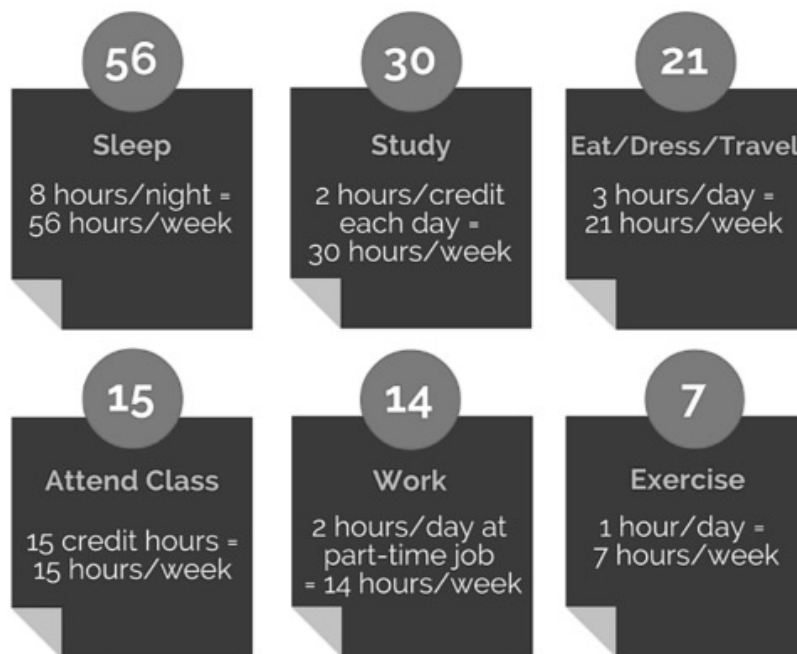


Figure 6.1  
*Suggested Use of Time from Vice President's Orientation Presentation*

### **Center for Academic Success**

In contrast to the VPSA's presentation, the Center for Academic Success' (CAS) orientation presentation provided students with a richer understanding about the academic experience. The CAS presentation occurred on the second day of orientation and the presenter had 15 minutes to present to all students attending orientation. A graduate assistant from CAS started the presentation by describing the four major services provided by the CAS office,

including academic workshops, individual consultations, tutoring, and supplemental instruction.

The presenter showed the CAS website and how students could navigate the website to find resources. The presenter then showed a power point slide with a picture of the Bloom's Taxonomy pyramid (See Figure 6.2) and described the different learning levels of Bloom's Taxonomy. The presenter told the audience that in high school students typically engage in learning at the lower levels of remembering and understanding of the taxonomy and that, in college, students will be asked to learn at the higher levels of applying and analyzing of the taxonomy, underscoring precise differences in the levels of learning students face as they transition into college.

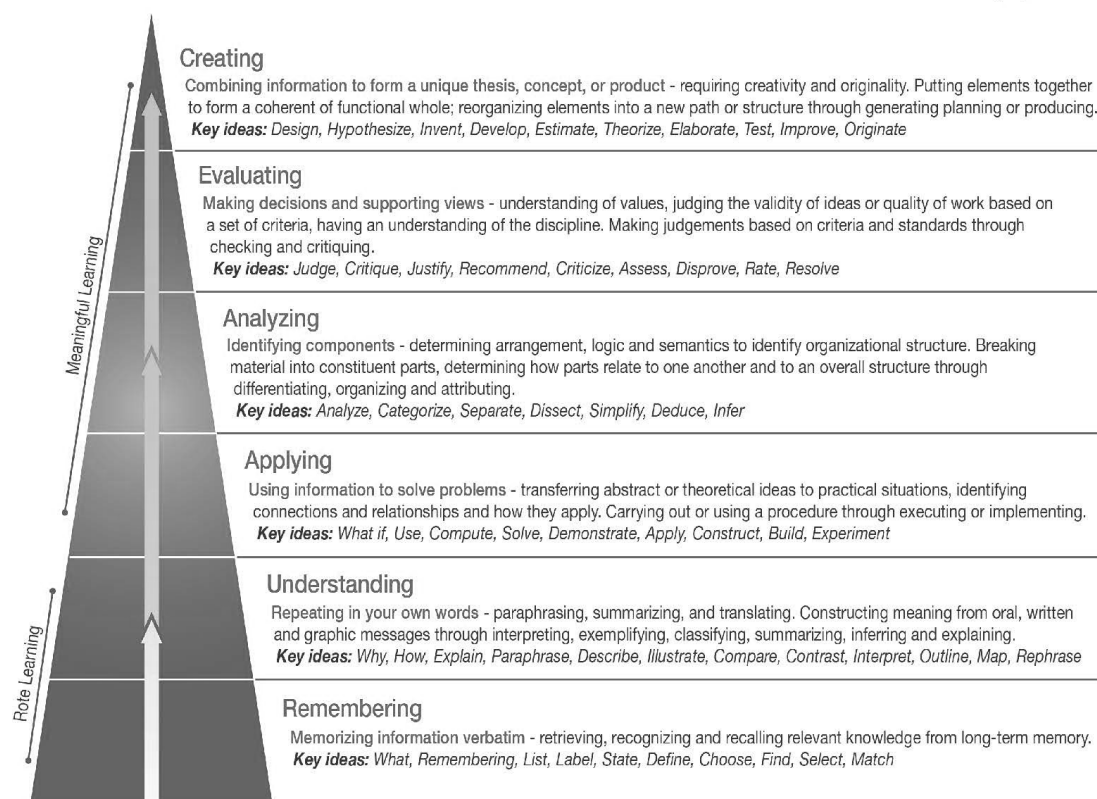


Figure 6.2  
*Bloom's Taxonomy Pyramid used by Center for Academic Success*

Another presenter from the CAS office briefly talked about Supplemental Instruction (SI), describing SI as a peer assisted study session that is designed for classes in which the student is enrolled. SI is offered for some of the more difficult courses at SFU that tend to have high DFW (drop, fail, withdraw) rates, such as Chemistry, Calculus, and Biology. The presenter encouraged incoming students to utilize SI, stating students who attend SI sessions on average received a .5 increase in course GPA, compared to students who do not attend SI sessions. Both of the presenters from CAS provided students with detailed information related into the academic rigor theme, highlighting the increased level of academic demands incoming first year students may face in their transition.

### **Tips on Scheduling**

The majority of orientation sessions focused on providing students with information on the academic process theme. On day one of orientation students and parents had the option to attend a session called “Tips on Scheduling”, a 40-minute session that covered a variety of topics related to scheduling for courses. The presenter started with a brief overview of the major academic dates, emphasizing the withdraw dates. The presenter then reviewed the general education requirements, encouraging the participants to follow along in the course catalog. The presenter stated that all SFU students needed to complete 39 hours of general education course work, and showed students the breakdown of the types of course work needed for fulfillment. The presenter explained how English and math course placement worked; she indicated that students’ placement was based on ACT/SAT scores, and in some cases, SFU may use advance placement scores to determine the student’s course level placement.

The presenter then listed all of the Senior Colleges at SFU; she informed the students that all incoming first year students are first advised by the University Center for First Year (UCFY),

except for students who major in the College of Agriculture, Business, and Music & Dramatic Arts; these three colleges directly admit students into their program. Students who intend to major in one of the other Senior Colleges are first advised by UCFY and then later must apply to their Senior College by meeting certain academic requirements.

Next the presenter informed students about the “Comprehensive Academic Tracking System”, also known as CATS; this program is designed to scan students’ academic schedules to ensure they are on track to graduate. The CATS system provides students with a recommended degree path for their major, detailing classes the students need to take and the order in which the classes should be taken. Students who do not stay on track with the CATS system have holds placed on their account and must schedule a meeting with an academic advisor to rectify the error and have the hold removed. While talking about the CATS system, the presenter encouraged students to consider their personal schedule including work and campus involvement and how these activities will impact how many course hours the student can handle.

Finally, the presenter showed students how to register for classes, how to search for classes, paying particular attention to prerequisites that may be needed for a course. The majority of the information presented in this session was procedural and policy based. The presenter described the various policies of which students needed to be aware and how students processed through the academic system. While the academic process information was beneficial to incoming students in terms of how to navigate the university system, there was little information shared about the academic rigor experiences students should expect.

### **MySFU**

At another orientation session that focused primarily on academic process, a 40-minute workshop addressed SFU’s online portal called MySFU. The session was presented by two of

the orientation leaders who took turns showing the students how to use MySFU. First, they showed how to access and log on to the online portal. Next they review all of the tabs of information found on MySFU and discussed several of the online tools related to academics. The presenters pointed out Moodle, a system that allows students to access course content posted by the professors. Professors often post items such as the course syllabi, class readings, assignments, and project descriptions for their courses. The orientation leaders recommended using the calendar feature on Moodle to keep track of future assignments and encouraged students to check Moodle daily, as this is one-way professors communicate with students.

Next, the orientation leaders showed the students how to register for classes using the online schedule booklet and searching for courses by department. Students need the course number, section numbers, course title, credit hours, and the instructor name for each course for which they wish to register. Armed with this information, the orientation leaders showed students how to create a schedule by going to the Schedule Request tab. Under this tab students enter all course information to complete the registration process. The orientation leaders informed the students they would register for class on the second day of orientation during the Senior College meetings.

Lastly, the orientation leaders spent time talking about withdrawals, informing the orientation students that, as freshmen and sophomores, student get three withdrawals per academic year; they warned that withdrawals show up on academic transcripts as W's. Again the information provided by the orientation leaders in this session was aimed at helping incoming students understand processes and systems at SFU to navigate through their time on campus.

## **Senior College Meeting**

The last session on the orientation schedule was the Senior College Information meeting. The researcher attended two of the eight Senior College meetings, and attended the Business and Humanities and Social Sciences meetings. The researcher describes the observations from the Business Senior College meeting because this meeting touched on both academic process and academic rigor themes, whereas the Humanities and Social Sciences meeting was primarily about academic process.

The Business College Information Meeting started with a welcome from the Dean of the College. The dean told the future business students that attending college was one of the most exciting times in their lives and that SFU is a special place because the campus has a family atmosphere. The dean then shared a little about the Business College, which graduates about 1000 students each May and has a 6-year graduation rate of 69% percent. The dean asked the students why they thought a third of the students did not graduate, and the students responded with a variety of answers. The dean exclaimed, "Because they didn't go to class!" The dean then emphasized the importance of attending class and warned the students that those who were most vulnerable to not graduating were the students who skated by in high school and did not put forth any effort. He further explained that these students arrived at college thinking they could do the same thing- not put any work at SFU. The dean informed the prospective students about the newly create Student Success Center at the Business College that is designed to track the progress of students and help students get access to internships and study abroad opportunities. The dean affirmed the prospective business students' decisions to study within the Business College, noting that the Business College produces competitive students who graduate with both people skills and content skills needed for success. The dean's information provided the



incoming first year students with details of how to develop academic expectations about academic rigor and the level of effort classes demand.

After the dean's presentation, the Assistant Dean for Academic Programs shared some policy and procedure information about the College of Business. The assistant dean welcomed the students and then reviewed all of the majors and concentrations within the College of Business. She explained that students will first be advised by the University Center for Freshmen Year and once students meet the requirements for the Business College, they can apply for acceptance into the college. The requirements for admission into the Business College include having 30 credit hours, taking certain prerequisite courses, achieving a C or better grade in those prerequisite courses, and meeting the 2.0 minimum SFU GPA and cumulative GPA. After sharing information about the requirements, the assistant dean informed the orientation students they would meet with an academic counselor to sign-up for their fall classes.

### **Students Perceptions of Orientation**

In addition to understanding how the university communicated expectations and what academic expectations it communicated, the researcher wanted to understand the participants' perspective of what they believed the university communicated about expectations during orientation. During the participant interviews, the researcher asked seven of the ten participants a follow up question about their SFU orientation experience, and how they believed the information shared shaped their expectations for their first semester of college. Three of the participants' responses to the question suggested orientation helped the student learn about procedural related items. Beck shared how orientation shaped his expectations:

Well, one thing was their expectations of us, like how my major you have to have a certain GPA to get into the program to even be considered and then you have to have so

many hours, you have to have so many qualifications to even be looked at by the program.

Beck explained that he learned about the specific requirements needed for the Athletic Training program including the GPA and number of credit hours. Andrew also thought that attending orientation helped him better understand some of the process and policies. Andrew remarked:

Ummm, I mean I finally got to see how all my classes were transferring, because I had transfer credits. And, uh, I didn't know how that was going to work out. So that definitely helped me make my schedule. Then I could figure out how the rest of my four years hopefully will look. And I learned about dual and double majors at that point too. Because I had wanted to do math and physics but I wasn't sure how it was all suppose to work out. I met somebody who was a dual major and she told me how that works.

Andrew thought that the information he gained from orientation helped him answer several of the questions he had about transfer credits and gave him knowledge about the double majors. Policy information about transfer credits and double majors also helped Andrew better understand what his academic schedule would entail.

Bianca also shared that she thought the information shared at orientation focused on scheduling of classes. Bianca expressed:

Uhhh, picking your classes, that was stressed a lot – like picking the right class. And also like how to get priority scheduling, someone told me that if you are a note taker you early scheduling and stuff like that. It was a lot of like – yeah, scheduling.

Bianca thought most of the information shared at orientation was centered on the many aspects related to scheduling academic coursework. These three participants shared that they thought orientation communicated messages designed to help students understand the procedures related to academic requirements and scheduling. In addition to participants thinking that orientation shaped their expectations about policy and procedures related to academic requirements, three participants expressed they did not think orientation shaped their expectations for their first

semester of college. When asked how the information shared at orientation shaped participant's expectations, Bianca shared:

It didn't really set up any expectations for how school was going to be. I mostly went so that I could get my classes scheduled and get everything set up early because we get priority scheduling because we went so early. Whenever I left I didn't really have any impression of SFU.

As Bianca highlighted, she thought orientation communicated information centered on scheduling courses; moreover she thought orientation did not set any expectations about college life and she left orientation with no impression. Participant Emma also did not think orientation changed her expectations:

Umm, they kind of like threw a lot of information at me a once, so it was kind of confusing almost. It was just a lot to organize in my head, so I remember telling myself, 'I hope it isn't always like this, I hope they aren't just throwing information at me.' Cause I knew it would be a lot more harder then I expected it to be, but I know they were just doing it because they had to tell you the information before you go to school. But, umm, it didn't really change my expectations of anything I just knew it was the information what we needed to know.

In addition to thinking that orientation did not change her expectations about what to expect at SFU, Emma also expressed that orientation communicated a lot of information and it was overwhelming for her to process. Dinorah also expressed that orientation did not impact her thoughts about expectations; she claimed, "Umm, it made me even more excited to come and it set the bar pretty high. I don't think I really thought of stuff to expect but yeah. Yeah, it's a blur." Dinorah also described orientation as being a blur, and not being able to recall much of what happened.

## **Discussion**

Both secondary and postsecondary educations assist incoming college students with the development of realistic and healthy academic expectations. The development of realistic expectations is imperative for college students to achieve higher levels of persistence and

retention (Braxton et al., 1995; Bowman & Denson, 2014). Postsecondary institutions have various avenues through which incoming students' expectations can be shaped to develop expectations that align with the college experience. The most predominate avenues include recruitment, admissions, orientation, first year experience (FYE) classes, first year experience programs, and interactions with faculty and staff members. The present research focused on how and what expectations were communicated through the admissions and orientation process at Southern Flagship University.

As state funding decreases for higher education, many admissions offices scramble to meet enrollment numbers to ensure that tuition monies are attained. To secure the necessary enrollment numbers, college admission offices may be tempted to appeal to a broad range of prospective college students. By pursuing a broad range of students, institutions dilute institutional characteristics and core values (Bowman & Denson, 2014). The admission recruitment process of prospective students influences incoming students' development of college expectations. When prospective students receive unclear or inaccurate messages about the higher education experience, students are likely to develop misaligned or poorly informed expectations. Bowman & Denson (2014) called for greater transparency about the campus environment and academic experience in the recruitment and admissions process; transparency about the campus experience leads to greater student retention. When incoming first year students receive accurate information about what to expect, students develop authentically informed expectations, allowing them to better navigate and anticipate future situations. The SFU admissions' view books included a wide range of information about the admission requirements, academic programs offered, financial aid, and the value SFU offers; however they offered very little information about the nature of academic rigor.

The researcher observed little communication about academic rigor during the SFU orientation presentations. The orientation schedule covered a variety of information, including campus culture, resources, and academics. Of the sessions that focused on academics, observations notes revealed that most often the academic information centered on the academic process. Several of the research participants described orientation as helping them better understand the academic process, particularly the process of scheduling classes. The lack of attention given to academic rigor is concerning given the salient research on college student expectations.

Prior research about college student expectations underscores the importance of colleges assisting incoming first year students with the development of academic expectations. Pleitz et al. (2015) found that incoming first year students bring with them expectations in three main categories: social engagement, institutional characteristics, and academic rigor. Of these three categories, the largest discrepancy between expectations and experience occurred within academic rigor (Pleitz et al., 2015). Incoming first year college students are likely to have a high discrepancy in academic rigor as a result of the fundamental difference between secondary and postsecondary pedagogy styles. In the case of SFU, incoming first year students received little information about academic rigor, which further perpetuates a high discrepancy in expectations about academic rigor.

Students' expectations about their college experience play a significant role in student retention. Pleitz et al. (2015) discovered that students who thought that their college experience did not match their expectations of college were less likely to return to college compared with peers whose expectations matched their campus experiences. Tinto's (2012) research on student success also indicated that clear and consistent communication about expectations is essential for

student retention and persistence towards graduation. When student's expectations are not met, Pancer et al. (2000) suggested student's expectations have been violated. A violation of student's expectations requires the student to reconcile the difference between their expectations and experience. Pancer et al. (2000) found students who lack the proper skills and support to reconcile differences in expectations and experiences are more likely to consider withdrawing from the institution. These research findings strongly indicate that institutions of higher education need to develop an intentional plan to communicate academic rigor expectations.

Institutions of higher education are responsible for assisting incoming first year students with developing realistic expectations and helping students develop the tools needed to manage expectation discrepancies. The psychological contract theory is a valuable theory in assisting college administrators with understanding the importance of expectation development and management. The psychological contract theory examines "an individual's belief regarding the terms and conditions of a reciprocal exchange agreement between that focal person and another party" (Rousseau, 1989, p.123). Primarily, the psychological contract theory has been used in business environments to understand a new employee's expectation of his or her work environment; however, more recently, researchers exploring college student expectations have used this theory to better understand the nature of expectations between students and institutions of higher education (Pletiz et al., 2015; Miller et al., 2005; & Kreig, 2013). For example, the psychology contract theory has been used to explore and explain workplace turnover, and in higher education the same theory is used to understand student attrition.

In summary, the document analysis of the SFU admission view books revealed that little information about academics was communicated to prospective and incoming first year students. Observations of the orientation sessions revealed SFU communicated more information about

academics, however largely focused on communicating academic process type information such as scheduling, degree requirements, policies, etc., and provided little information about what students should expect relative to academic rigor. Several of the research participants indicated orientation helped them to better understand academic process related topics, while other research participants expressed orientation did not impact their development of expectations. The findings from the document analysis, observations, and research participant reflections serve as a starting point for evaluating how effectively SFU communicated academic expectations to incoming first year students.

## **CHAPTER SEVEN: IMPLICATIONS AND MOVING FORWARD**

### **Purpose of the Research**

This dissertation research aimed to advance understanding of the role of academic expectations in the context of student retention and persistence. Prior research examining college student expectations indicated that when college students' expectations match his or her experiences, the student is more likely to be engaged academically and socially, and remain enrolled at college (Braxton et al., 1995). Recent research has provided knowledge on the types of expectations student bring with them to college (Jackson et al., 2000), the complexity of expectations (Pancer et al., 2000), and the impact of unmet expectations on academics and persistence (Suhre et al., 2007). Despite the increase of research related to college students' expectations, little research exists on how college students develop their academic expectations. This research study set out to answer the following questions related to the development of academic performance expectations:

- How do first year college students develop academic performance expectations?
- What are the differences in how first year students develop academic performance expectations based on their prior academic performance (high school GPA and ACT/SAT scores)?
- How does the university communicate academic expectations held for first year students through the admissions and orientation process? What academic expectations does the university communicate?

Several findings emerged from individual participant interviews, document analysis, and observation. In this last chapter the researcher presents research findings to support theoretical



and pragmatic implications and corresponding recommendations. Lastly, this chapter addresses limitations of the study and presents direction for future research.

### **Summary of Findings**

Three major research findings corresponded with each of the three research questions. The first finding revealed that incoming first year students used four main factors when developing future academic performance expectations, including differences between high school and college, prior academic experiences, course impressions, and required actions. The four factors provided insight into what information incoming first year students believed to be important for their achievement of academic goals.

The second research finding discovered two significant differences between the two participant groups. The first difference centered on the student's self-reported level of preparedness; the *Above* group participants reported feeling more prepared to meet their college academic expectations and the *Below* group participants reported feeling less prepared. The second difference was the overestimation of final course grades; while both groups had some degree of overestimation, the *Below* group overestimated their final course grades by a greater number of letter grades than the *Above* group.

The last research finding revealed that SFU communicated little about academics via admissions' view books and summer orientation sessions. The SFU orientation sessions communicated much information about academics but focused principally on academic process and presented very little information about academic rigor.

### **Implications and Recommendations**

The research findings from this study supported earlier research on the misalignment of expectations and a growing college readiness gap, and therefore have implications for both

secondary and postsecondary education sectors. The researcher first presents implications and recommendations that aligned with the secondary field of education and then those of postsecondary education.

### **Secondary Education Implications**

The first recommendation calls for increased communication between secondary and postsecondary sectors; communication between these two sections should address the college readiness gap that incoming first year students face and should better align students' academic rigor expectations with what they will actually experience. As the number of high school students who aspire to earn a college degree surges, it becomes progressively important for secondary and postsecondary sectors of education to increase communication and collaboration focusing on creating a unified and effective transition between the two education sectors. Secondary and postsecondary communication should focus on addressing the misalignment of skills and knowledge; results of the ACT National Curriculum Survey should serve as a springboard for discussion. The National Curriculum Survey assesses skills and knowledge that are currently perceived by secondary and postsecondary educators as being important and several incongruences were found between the two fields. A potential method of accountability for increasing communication between secondary and postsecondary fields includes having high schools report the number of students from their high school that attain college degrees.

Increased communication leads to the second recommendation, which aims to address the college readiness gap, and calls for a change in academic programs/curriculum that better prepares students to meet the academic demands of college. Such programs might include a senior seminar, with a focus on providing prospective college students with the tools and skills

required for a smooth and successful transition. The senior seminar should include lessons on time management, study styles, Bloom's Taxonomy, and growth mindset.

Additionally, changes to secondary curriculum are necessary to better prepare student for the academic rigor students will encounter at college. Changes to curriculum should include high school courses that prepare college bound students for the same level of academic rigor students face in college, such as difficult assignments, large amounts of reading, applying critical thinking skills, application of course content, and volume of work required outside of class. Since all participants in this research cited advance placement courses as a source of feeling prepared to meet college academic demands, secondary administrators and educators should identify those aspects of the AP coursework that best prepare students to meet the demands of college academic rigor, and should work to incorporate those aspects into regular education courses.

Lastly, the research findings have implications for secondary policy reform; to truly understand the current barriers impeding college readiness, it is necessary to understand secondary education policies that shape educational practices. One specific example of policy reform that requires attention is the teacher evaluation process. SFU is located in a state that utilizes Common Core State Standards, which implements several assessments across the K- 12 experience. The assessments used to measure learning at the high school level include: End of Course test, American College Test (ACT), Career readiness test (replacement for ACT, for students who do not plan on going to college), AP tests, and College Level Examination Program (CLEP). Teacher evaluations in this state require that half of the educators' evaluation uses one of three methods to measure growth in student achievement: value-added, common assessment, or student learning target data; the method selected for evaluation is based on the type of course. The other half of the educators' score is qualitative measure of performance, using traditional

evaluation techniques such as classroom observations. The development and use of these types of educator evaluations attempt to make the individual teacher and school district more responsible for the growth and learning of their students, however, there are some drawbacks. In particular, evaluations that use value-added and common core assessments face criticisms, such as “teaching to the test”, where teachers are believed to teach students how to preform well on test; however, students do not master other skills and knowledge that are necessary for a successful transition to college academics. Another drawback in using the Common Core Assessment is that its scores are used solely at the secondary level. Near the end of a high school student’s career, state-based assessments may hold no weight with college bound students, as state-based assessment scores are not considered in the admission decision process; instead students are more concerned with their final high school GPA and scores on the ACT or SAT. Secondary and postsecondary policy makers need to engage in conversation about how state-based assessments can also be used to demonstrate college readiness skills and knowledge.

### **Post-secondary Education Implications**

Beyond the secondary education realm, research findings also have substantial implications and recommendations for intuitions of higher education. The findings from this research suggested several implications for how SFU communicated academic expectations through the admissions and orientation process. The findings from the admissions document analysis and orientation observation suggested SFU communicated little about what incoming students should expect about academic rigor. This information paired with the findings that both the *Above* and the *Below* participant groups overestimated their fall academic performance signified a need to increase communication about the nature of academic rigor at SFU. By increasing communication about academic rigor, incoming students would be better informed

about the realities and differences in academic demands of high school and college, and the resources available to students to help them successfully navigate the increased academic demands.

In addition to increased communication about academic rigor through admissions materials and orientation sessions, SFU should pursue additional opportunities to allow for continued dialogue about academic rigor with incoming first year students. Many colleges and universities engage students in conversation about academics in first year experience courses, also known as a FYE courses. SFU currently does not have an FYE course for incoming first year students, however, should strongly consider implementing such a course. Specifically, the FYE course should incorporate the four factors of differences between high school and college, prior academic experiences, course impressions, and required actions that students identified as important for determining future academic performance to engage students in discussion about the realities of college academic rigor. Of the four identified factors, students discerned differences between high school and college and prior academic experience as the two main factors for consideration. Facilitators of the FYE course should focus on these two factors, and help students to explore and to contextualize their prior experiences with the realities of academics at SFU. For example, participants recognized academics would be harder at the college level, however, were limited in their ability to specifically describe how they would be harder. All of the research participants used their past academic experiences to predict their future academic performance; several of the participants cited taking a high school class in \_\_\_\_\_ subject, would allow them to perform better in \_\_\_\_\_ subject at the college level. However, it must be acknowledged that students may not have considered differences in pedagogy, material covered, pace of material covered, and opportunities for points. Using past

academic experience without contextualizing the experience with the realities of college academics negatively skews the students' perceptions of their ability to perform academically in the future.

Students who participate in first year experience courses enjoy significant advantages over students who do not, advantages that include more frequent interactions with faculty and higher satisfaction overall with the college experience (NSSE, 2005). If SFU does not have the resources to provide an FYE course experience to all incoming SFU students, administrators should target students with a GPA below a 3.2 and an ACT score below 25, as these students are more likely to overestimate their final course grades than students who performed higher on GPA and ACT.

Lastly, the findings of this study have implications for the relationship between institutions of higher education and students. This study used psychological contract theory as a framework to understand the relationship between students and their university. The psychological contract theory aims to understand "an individual's belief regarding the terms and conditions of a reciprocal exchange agreement between that focal person and another party" (Rousseau, 1989, p. 123). Historically this theory has been applied to the field of business to explore employee/employee relationships, however, more recently the psychological contract theory has been applied to student/university relationships. Predominantly, the psychological contract theory has been used to examine employee turnover as a result of violation of the psychosocial contract; the same theory could be applied to understanding student retention issues. When students leave their university as a result of a violation in the psychological theory, there are implications for the university. Institutions of higher education have a responsibility to uphold their end of the contract and to ensure students understand the expectations the university

has of its students. However, it is the personal experience of the researcher that institutional type and profile shapes the attitude of the role and degree to which the university believes it is responsible for communicating and ensuring commitments are met. Moving forward, institutions of higher education should examine the role the institution plays in helping incoming first year students to develop realistic expectations of the demands students will be asked to meet.

The goal of the above recommendations is to help incoming first year students better understand the realities of the academic rigor they will face, thus allowing them to develop more realistic expectations and better preparing incoming them for the academic demands ahead of them. By preparing students to face the academic demands of college courses better positions them up to succeed academically. Students who perform better academically are more likely to be retained and ultimately persist to graduation (Kirby & Sharpe, 2001), underscoring the importance of providing students with foundational skills and knowledge, paired with a representative understanding of college academic expectations.

### **Future Research**

In conclusion, the researcher offers several areas for future research to expand current content knowledge. Future research should further explore the four main factors students considered in the development of their academic performance expectations. Research on the four main factors should include measuring emphasis students place on each of the factors, by determine what factors students consider more highly, and thus allow higher education administrators to develop precise interventions and programs to help students better align their expectations of academics. Additionally, developing a quantitative instrument to more broadly

measure the four factors and to determine if certain factors have more impact on future academic performance than others is another possibility for future research.

Researchers with the ability to conduct a longitudinal study should examine student experiences and thoughts about academic performance expectations over the course of an academic year. Following students through their entire first year, conducting interviews after the fall semester and again at the end of the spring semester, will provide insight into how students' experiences with academic performance expectations develop over time. Particularly of interest would be students' thoughts of not returning due to discrepancy in expected grades versus final earned grades. First year students' suggestions of how colleges can improve the alignment of expectations should also be examined.

Finally, further investigation of student's overestimation of final course grades is needed, including a general understanding of incoming first year students' overestimation relative to all students, as well different subpopulations and demographics of students. This particular study looked at differences in overestimation by prior academic performance (high school GPS & ACT/SAT scores); future research should examine other areas that could provide insight into differences of grade overestimation. A better understanding of characteristics that attribute to higher grade overestimation will allow for identifying interventions to address the problem. Additionally, a longitudinal study of changes that may occur with academic performance overestimation as students progress through their college career would aid future researchers in understanding if grade overestimation is a phenomenon unique to incoming first year students.



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## APPENDIX A RESEARCH INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Participant Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Date Of Interview: \_\_\_\_\_

### First Interview:

Generally what expectations do you have for your first semester of college? What expectations do you have academically, socially, generally for your first semester at [REDACTED]?

What information has [REDACTED] communicated that has informed/shaped what your expectations are for your [REDACTED] experience?

Specifically what expectations do you have towards academic at [REDACTED]? What do you think has influenced your understanding of what to expect from academics at college?

How might the academic demands be different from high school to college?

Please list each of your fall semester courses along with the final grade you expect to earn in each class. (Researcher will provide participants with a sheet of paper to list all fall classes, indicate the grade they expect to earn, and their high school GPA.)

Please share with me the classes you have listed, the grade you expect to earn, and why you believe you will earn that grade.

What factors are you considering when determining the grade you expect to earn in each class? (Are you considering your high school experience when determining setting academic expectations for your first semester?)

How confident are you that you will be able to attain your expected academic goals?

What actions do you believe are necessary for you to take on your end to achieve these grades?

Do you feel your high school experience has prepared you to meet the academic expectations of college? Why or why not? (How did you perform academically in High School?)

Are there past experiences/influences that you feel will influence how you expect to perform academically this fall? (HS academics, outside activities, family, friends)

## APPENDIX B RESEARCH PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Student ID# \_\_\_\_\_

Age: \_\_\_\_\_ Race: \_\_\_\_\_ Gender: \_\_\_\_\_

Hometown (City, State): \_\_\_\_\_

Name of High School: \_\_\_\_\_ Type of High School: \_\_\_\_\_

Major: \_\_\_\_\_

Please list all of the course you will be enrolled in this Fall 2016 semester below and the final grade you believe you will earn in each class.

Name of Class	What final grade do you believe you will earn in each of your Fall Semester Classes?

What cumulative GPA do you believe you will earn for the Fall Semester? \_\_\_\_\_

## APPENDIX C INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL

### ACTION ON PROTOCOL APPROVAL REQUEST



Institutional Review Board  
Dr. Dennis Landin, Chair  
130 David Boyd Hall  
Baton Rouge, LA 70803  
P: 225.578.8692  
F: 225.578.5983  
[irb@lsu.edu](mailto:irb@lsu.edu) | [lsu.edu/irb](http://lsu.edu/irb)

TO: Kenneth Fasching-Varner  
Education

FROM: Dennis Landin  
Chair, Institutional Review Board

DATE: July 5, 2016

RE: IRB# 3739

TITLE: A study of first year college student's academic expectations and retention

New Protocol/Modification/Continuation: New Protocol

Review type: Full ☐ Expedited ☒ Review date: 6/9/2016

Risk Factor: Minimal ☒ Uncertain ☐ Greater Than Minimal ☐

Approved ☒ Disapproved ☐

Approval Date: 7/5/2016 Approval Expiration Date: 7/4/2017

Re-review frequency: (annual unless otherwise stated)

Number of subjects approved: 20

LSU Proposal Number (if applicable):

Protocol Matches Scope of Work in Grant proposal: (if applicable)

By: Dennis Landin, Chairman 

**PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR: PLEASE READ THE FOLLOWING –**  
Continuing approval is **CONDITIONAL** on:

1. Adherence to the approved protocol, familiarity with, and adherence to the ethical standards of the Belmont Report, and LSU's Assurance of Compliance with DHHS regulations for the protection of human subjects\*
2. Prior approval of a change in protocol, including revision of the consent documents or an increase in the number of subjects over that approved.
3. Obtaining renewed approval (or submittal of a termination report), prior to the approval expiration date, upon request by the IRB office (irrespective of when the project actually begins); notification of project termination.
4. Retention of documentation of informed consent and study records for at least 3 years after the study ends.
5. Continuing attention to the physical and psychological well-being and informed consent of the individual participants, including notification of new information that might affect consent.
6. A prompt report to the IRB of any adverse event affecting a participant potentially arising from the study.
7. Notification of the IRB of a serious compliance failure.
8. **SPECIAL NOTE: When emailing more than one recipient, make sure you use bcc.**

*\*All investigators and support staff have access to copies of the Belmont Report, LSU's Assurance with DHHS, DHHS (45 CFR 46) and FDA regulations governing use of human subjects, and other relevant documents in print in this office or on our World Wide Web site at <http://www.lsu.edu/irb>*

## APPENDIX D PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

### Consent Form

1. Study Title: A study of first year college student's academic expectations and retention.
2. Performance Site: [REDACTED]
3. Investigators: The following investigators are available for questions about this study,  
M-F, 8:00 a.m. - 4:30p.m. Christina Covert 817-805-5277  
M-F, 8:00 a.m. - 4:30p.m. Dr. Fasching-Varner 225-578 - 2918
4. Purpose of the Study: The purpose of this research project is to learning about incoming freshmen's expectations of their first semester academic performance.
5. Subject Inclusion: [REDACTED] first year freshmen, age 18-20.
6. Number of subjects: 10
7. Study Procedures: The study will be conducted by asking the participants to participate in 30 minute interviews where they will be asked questions about their first semester academic expectations.
8. Benefits: Participants will receive a 10 dollar gift cards to the [REDACTED] bookstore. The study may yield valuable information about assisting students with academic transitions between high school and college.
9. Risks: The inadvertent release of participant information. However, efforts will be made to maintain the confidentiality of your interview records. Study files will be kept in a secure cabinet, which only the investigator has access.
10. Right to Refuse: Subjects may choose not to participate or to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty or loss of any benefit to which they might otherwise be entitled.
11. Privacy: Results of the study may be published, but no names or identifying information will be included in the publication. Subject identity will remain confidential unless disclosure is required by law.
12. Signatures: The study has been discussed with me and all my questions have been answered. I may direct additional questions regarding study specifics to the investigators. If I have questions about subjects' rights or other concerns, I can contact Dennis Landin, Institutional Review Board (225) 578-8692, [irb@lsu.edu](mailto:irb@lsu.edu), [www.lsu.edu/irb](http://www.lsu.edu/irb). I agree to participate in the study described above and acknowledge the investigator's obligation to provide me with a signed copy of this consent form.

- ☐ I give permission for the researcher to request my final Fall 2016 course grades and Fall 2016 overall [REDACTED] GPA.
- ☐ I do not give permission for the researcher to request my final Fall 2016 course grades and Fall 2016 overall [REDACTED] GPA.

Participant Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## **VITA**

Christina M Covert was born in Las Vegas, Nevada. After attending Pennridge High School in Perkasio, Pennsylvania, she attended Mercyhurst University located in Erie, Pennsylvania. While at Mercyhurst she earned a Bachelors of Business with a minor in Fashion Merchandising. Christina's heavy involvement in co-curricular activities led her to pursue a career in Student Affairs. Upon graduating from Mercyhurst University, Christina moved to Denton, Texas to attend the University of North Texas (UNT) to earn her Masters in Higher Education Administration. While at UNT, she served as the graduate assistant for the University Program Council and Parent Programs.

After graduating with her Masters she was hired as an Assistant Hall Director at UNT and then worked as a Hall Director at Texas Christian University in Fort Worth, Texas for two years. In 2014 Christina decided to pursue her dreams of obtaining her PhD and enrolled at Louisiana State University (LSU) located in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. While at LSU, Christina has served as the graduate assistant for the Tiger Bridge program and then the graduate assistant for Retention and Assessment for the Division of Student Affairs.